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# PRISONER OF WAR AND FUGITIVE

*by G. H. HARRIS*

THIS IS THE STORY of a young N.C.O. of The King's Royal Rifle Corps, one of the Regiments forming part of the Eighth Army in Egypt; and one of the Regiments of the 7th Armoured Division ("The Desert Rats").

The author joined the Territorial Army in 1939 at the age of seventeen, and was mobilised with his battalion—the 4th Cheshires—on the outbreak of war. Transferred to the K.R.R.C. in March, 1940, he volunteered for service overseas with 2nd Battalion which embarked for the Middle East in May, 1940. He served in the Libyan campaign of 1941 and in the Western Desert in 1942, when whilst serving with an Anti-Tank Platoon he was taken prisoner by the German 21st Panzer Division on 2nd June, 1942.

His story deals with life as a prisoner of war, and of ten months "behind the lines" following escape from a prisoner of war camp.

Here is a story, simply told, which will bring to the reader something of the life of a prisoner of war in Italy and of his bids for freedom in a country torn by war.

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PRISONER OF WAR  
AND FUGITIVE

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# PRISONER OF WAR AND FUGITIVE

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by G. H. Harris



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He was taken prisoner by the German 21st Panzer Division on 2nd June, 1942, at 5 p.m.

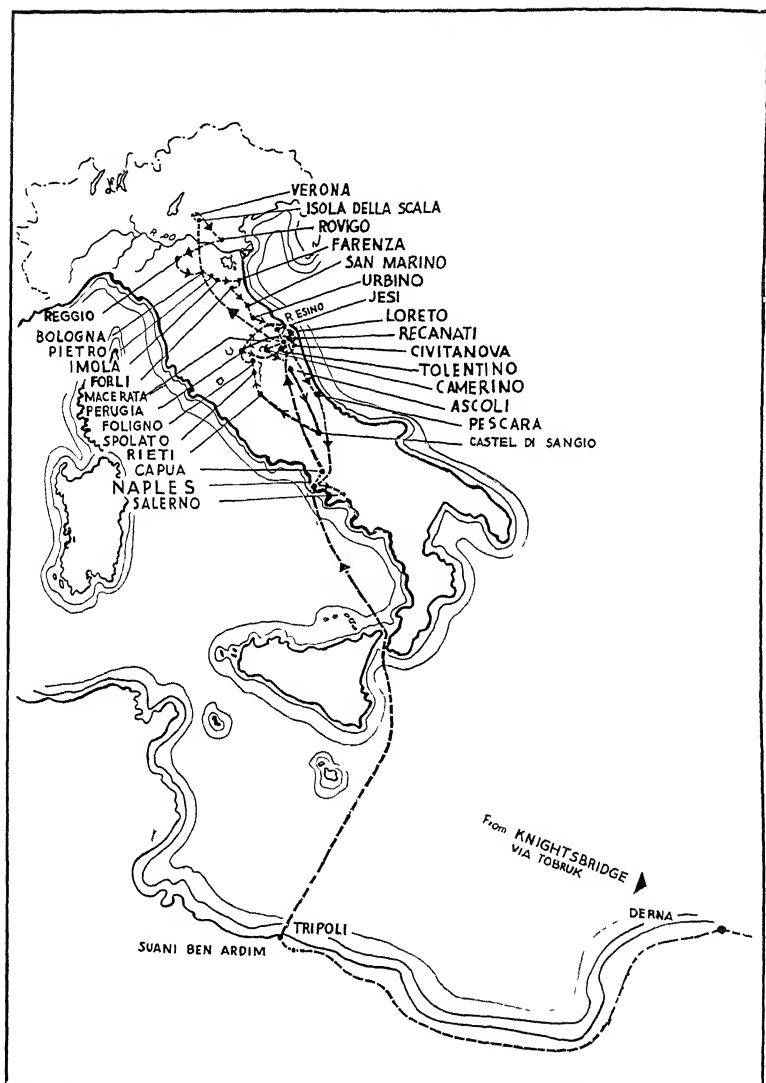
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## CHAPTER 1

## CAPTURED

MY Regiment, The K.R.R.C., had been in most of the fighting in the Western Desert in Libya. Having seen my share of the fighting, I was unlucky enough to be captured on 2nd June, 1942, between the area of "Knightsbridge" and Tobruk. I had always had the belief that I would safely "see the day through," and had never thought that I should be taken prisoner of war. So you can understand some of my feelings when I was "in the bag." From the battle area I was marched back with other prisoners to a place called Derna, which is on the coast.

On the way there we were shelled more than once by our own artillery and on two occasions were "strafed" by the R.A.F. who were, unfortunately, responsible for a number of casualties. However, on the morning of 4th June, 1942, we reached Derna and were put into a prisoner of war "cage."

Whilst there I reflected upon the difference between the Germans and the Italians. The former always acted as soldiers, and I remembered that on our march to Derna the Germans, when they saw us passing, would just look curiously at us without making comments. The Italians were always untidy and when they passed us on their way to the front they booed, shouted and spat at us. Later on I found out how very much the Germans despised their allies.

We were kicked and pushed into the camp at Derna and the more unfortunates were "helped in" with the butt of the Italian sentries' rifles. Since the time of our capture, none of us had been given any water or food. My tongue was swollen for want of water and I lay in the cage, cursing the Germans, Italians, flies, sun, the war and everything. During this time some of the Italians were standing close to the wire booing and shouting at us. After about two hours of waiting an Italian officer and an interpreter came into the cage and told us that we would be getting something to eat

before moving to our next camp, regretting, however, that we could not be supplied with water. One of the prisoners near him told the officer "to go to Hell," and was very soon "put to sleep" by the interpreter's rifle butt. All of us were now feeling very low and were craving for food and water. Eventually, we were ordered to "get in threes" and were then given a tin of Italian corned beef which, we were informed, had to last us until our next destination.

After I had been given my food I made my way to a less crowded corner of the cage and as I passed the others I noticed that the strain was telling on a few of them. Most men had a growth of beard with their hair all over the place and sand caked to their faces and clothing. I suppose I must have looked the same myself, for I was feeling a bit giddy through standing in the line for my tin of bully beef. After having eaten a few mouthfuls of this horse meat, for such it was, I was forced to stop eating owing to the fact that my mouth was too sore and my tongue too swollen.

Looking around me I noticed that most of the other men were in the same plight and that where the open tins had been placed on the sand they were instantly swarming with flies. So, with our tongues feeling like rasps and with the sun and flies to add to our troubles, we lay there all the afternoon, wondering what our future was to be and, for myself, thinking of home and England.

That evening we were told that we were staying for the night, but there were no blankets. Anyone who knows the desert also knows how cold the nights are. However, we had to make the best of things, and so, with a pal who was lucky enough to be in possession of his greatcoat, I settled down to try to get some sleep. Most of that night we were awake because of the cold and prayed for the morning to come. We heard the R.A.F. overhead on their way to bomb some place. At dawn we were shouted at and kicked up by the guards. The morning was very cold and we stood around in our K.D. suits nearly frozen. About an hour later we were ordered to fall in and started to pass through the gate on to the lorries. As we passed through the gate we were counted by the officer and then packed on the trucks until there was hardly enough room to breathe.

For all this, we were in a better mood, for at least we were not walking that day. Had we been made to march I know that it would

have proved too much for some of the prisoners, and if they had fallen out, I had no doubts as to their fate.

The sun was up and getting warm as we started off to our unknown destination. The column comprised six lorry loads of prisoners and an escort on motor cycles in front, rear and on the flanks, each cyclist carrying a sub-machine gun. We passed Italian convoys who were going to the fighting area and they booed, jeered and shouted "Vincere!" The day wore on and the perspiration was pouring from us. Most of us had taken off our shirts and these now formed home-made turbans. We were craving for water and cursing the heat. As we moved on, sometimes passing close to the sea, I wondered what my life would be behind barbed wire. I was feeling bad and didn't care too much what happened; all the time I was thinking of water. However, by using my will power, which proved to be stronger than I thought, I managed to keep going, and I think that but for the fact of having had a good will power I should not be alive now.

At roughly three in the afternoon the column halted. As if everyone had been thinking the same, there was a sudden rush from the trucks to the taps under the radiator, to drink the water. The guards tried to stop us, and in doing so shot five prisoners, but even this couldn't stop our desire for water. Seeing that their efforts were of no avail, they formed a cordon round the convoy, standing there jeering at us as we fought each other for a chance to get a drink. All pride had departed and had they shot at us I don't think they would have stopped us from trying to get to the radiator water. We were just like animals, and were getting pretty desperate. This, I think, the officer-in-charge realized, and eventually order was restored and he told us that we would get water at our next stop, but that the longer we delayed the worse we would get. We gave heed to his words and soon afterwards the convoy started off.

At about 5 p.m. that day we reached our destination and soon found ourselves in something like a large sheep-pen. The heat of the day was now wearing off, but as we lay in the sand we were tormented by flies. Shortly after our arrival we were told that we would be getting food and water. This heartened us greatly and we lay around waiting and watching every move of the Italians.

Later, two lorries pulled up near the gate, there they started to



roll off drums of water into the compound. I, like everyone else, realized it was water and there was a mad rush towards the gate. Again the sentries started to use their rifle butts and fired into the air; eventually, order was restored and we were told to fall in. We were then given two Italian biscuits and a tin of bully beef, and a few minutes later I was having the finest drink of water that I've ever had. After finishing my food with some effort, I managed to borrow a tin hat and after filling it with water I drank it, looking at it all the time. Everyone was now feeling better and I heard many feeble attempts to laugh. So, feeling exhausted and still very weak, I scooped out a hollow in the sand and after lying in it, covered myself with sand and soon fell into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSIT TO TRIPOLI

WITH the rest of the prisoners, I was awakened with the help of a sentry's boot, at dawn the next morning. We moved out of the pen with the usual count on the way out and proceeded to climb into the lorries, once again ready for a "joy ride"! We received our rations of bully and biscuits, and at about 7 a.m. started on our way. It was 5th June and being hotter than usual we knew we were going to get a sandstorm. As we moved along the coast road, packed like sardines on the trucks, I saw now and again the Méditerranéen, and would have given a lot to have been able to go for a bathe. We passed a lot of convoys and the Italian personnel found childish delight in jeering at us, whilst the Germans would just stare. By now we were getting used to all this and took no notice of the jeering. At midday we halted and were given water, and after an hour's stop moved on again.

We were now getting used to our existence as prisoners of war and so, instead of throwing away our empty tins, we kept them to take the place of cups.

At about three in the afternoon we ran into the sandstorm and very soon were completely and heavily coated with sand. And so,

travelling each day, living on the meagre rations, sleeping at night in wired-off compounds without blankets, we eventually reached a camp close to Tripoli, which was to prove the worst "concentration camp" I was ever in, and where many prisoners of war died.

### CHAPTER 3

## SUANI BEN ARDIM

THIS was the name of our last camp in Tripolitania and it was there that I suffered most during my time as a prisoner of war. We entered the camp on 18th July, 1942, and through having had no baths or clean clothes to put on and with sleeping at night on the bare sand we were very lousy, and my shirt (such as it now was) was crawling with lice.

The camp was roughly nine miles from Tripoli and had accommodation for 2,000, but more often it held twice that amount. It consisted of the usual barbed wire fencing and the prisoners of war lived in tents which were spread out amongst a small wood. In each tent there were fourteen men. The cookhouse consisted of a wired-off portion of the camp, and the "food" was prepared by Italians.

On entering the camp we were issued with a spoon and mess tin, then we were formed up to await the arrival of the Commandant. Soon, through the gate came the Commandant with his escort of officers. He was small and very fat and swaggered along with all the glory of a little dictator. We were later to find out that he was an ardent Fascist and loved the British! He gave us a lecture, telling us that whilst we were there we would do as we were ordered; that anyone who tried to escape (if they had the strength!) would be shot when caught, and also that the whole camp would be punished. I knew that whilst we were there he and the staff would do their utmost to break down our morale, and vowed that I would see it through. As soon as the "lecture" was over, we were allotted a tent for every 14 men. I lay in the tent with the others, each of us wondering how long we should be there. We were quite weak and were always talking about food.

At 6 p.m. that evening we were informed by the camp interpreter that we were going to eat and were also to be issued with two blankets each. Shortly afterwards, we were called out and organized into squads of 90 to one large dixie. The food was then brought off the wood fires and the serving began. As each man reached the dixie he received a mess tin of rice and turnip tops. Each man received roughly a pint of this soup. However, it was the first hot meal that we had received since our capture and we didn't grumble at it then. After I had received my ration, I made my way to the tent and with one hand swatting away the flies, soon finished the meal.

I then filled my mess tin with water and lay back on the sand near the tent feeling a lot better. At 7.30 p.m. we again paraded and received two blankets which were of very poor material, but to us, then, they were worth a lot.

Many of the chaps were very ill with dysentery and I was soon to find out that worse times were coming.

I got down to bed that night, but after a lot of turning and scratching, found sleep impossible as the tent was alive with lice. I decided to try outside. Finding what looked a likely spot I scooped a hollow in the sand and then placed a blanket in it and, lying down and tucking myself in with the other, I tried to sleep. The night was very cold and I was still pestered with lice. After gazing at the stars for what seemed an eternity I eventually fell into a restless sleep. As time passed I got more used to the conditions in which we had to live and was soon able to sleep throughout the whole night in spite of the lice.

My stay at Suani Ben Ardim was from 18th July to 2nd August, 1942.

## CHAPTER 4

### CAMP LIFE

WE had to get up each morning just after dawn and were then on "roll call" for about an hour. Our breakfast consisted of a drink of ersatz coffee, made, I believe, from burnt and ground acorns. On this we lived until about 11 a.m. when we were given our dinner; this was 200 gms. of brown or black bread, roughly the

size of a large penny bun, and 60 gms. of cheese, and on this we survived until the evening. At night we had our "hot meal," which was sixty per cent. water. As soon as each group had received its rations one could watch the mad rush towards the dixie, where everyone would fight each other in an effort to get a last spoonful of rice. We then had to wait for "tomorrow for more." Every one of us was continually hungry and as each day passed drearily by we lost more weight and gradually became living skeletons. Never before had I realized what hardships human beings could endure, and now I was seeing incidents happen which one would never previously have believed.

Every morning we heard that someone had died; at first, maybe one or two, but as the time passed, the number of deaths increased. Most of the chaps were dying of malnutrition, dysentery and dropsy, and very rarely did the Commandant order the sick to be taken to hospital. Others died because they gave up the will to live. We could feel ourselves getting weaker and it was soon a common sight to see two prisoners of war helping a third along.

I saw prisoners give gold rings to the guards in exchange for a little extra bread and perhaps some jam and cigarettes. I saw others give their watches and even their boots, or anything else they possessed and which the guards wanted, for food. The craving for cigarettes was acute and before long we were smoking the bark from the trees.

Most of the days we lay in the tents thinking of what the future held for us and praying that conditions in Italy were better. We tried to pass the time quickly by taking off our clothing and attempting to get rid of the lice. Our clothes were filthy and also our bodies, and when we tried to get the Commandant to give us some soap, the answer was always "No." Day by day we could notice each other getting thinner and older, with eyes sunken and cheeks falling in. Every time we went for our food we had to hold on to the tent pole for a few moments because of the "blackouts" or giddiness we were now experiencing.

During my stay there, four chaps died in our tent.

Eventually, the day we had been waiting for arrived, and the Italians started to send the first batches off to Tripoli and thence to Italy. It was cruel to watch the "lucky ones" leaving the camp,

all of them very thin and some helping their pals along and on to the trucks. The party that went prior to my departure was torpedoed by our Navy and most of them "went down." I learnt this from some of the survivors whom I met later in Italy.

On the night of 29th July one of the prisoners of war attempted to escape. Before he tried to get out of the camp he was told by some friends that it was hopeless and that, even should he get away from the camp, he was too weak to get far. However, he was determined to go. (I heard later that it was because his pal had left for Italy and he felt he was just going mad.) This man wouldn't listen to advice and said that he would rather try to get out than stay and go completely insane. He said "cheerio" at 11 p.m. that night and shortly afterwards we all heard the stutter of a machine gun. The following morning we knew he had been killed as his body lay near the barbed wire. It was only then that I was told by one of the chaps from his tent why he had tried to escape.

The Commandant was true to his promise and for two days we went without our "hot meal," and were kept standing for an hour in the heat of the afternoon sun. During the two days that we went short of our hot meal the water supply was turned on for two hours a day only. Looking back, I often wonder how we lived through it all, it now seems so unreal.

We heard many rumours in the camp and items like "British Troops invade Tripoli," we gladly received, probably because we never got any official news of the progress of the war and so we believed them, hoping they might be true, and also to keep up our morale. Often we heard the R.A.F. bombing Tripoli and wished that we were in those planes to help them.

So time passed by, with an occasional party going off to Italy, and we who were left hoping that we should be on the next party. Each day was the same and we were always hungry and lousy.

Every day one or maybe more prisoners were taken out to be buried at Tripoli.

Then came the great day and on the night of 1st August, 1942, I was informed that I was in the party that was going out the following day. I could have cried with joy knowing that at last I was leaving.

The morning of 2nd August came and with 1,500 others, I waited to go.

## ITALY BOUND

As each man's name was called he made his way to the gate. He was then given two days' rations, consisting of two tins of Italian bully beef and four hard biscuits. Each prisoner of war also had to hand his blankets back at the gate. We stood around waiting for our names to be called and saying good-bye to different friends who were not going with us. After a long wait, my own name was called out and I pushed my way forward to receive rations and to hand in my two blankets.

We were lucky enough to be going four of the nine kilometres by truck. I was packed in the usual prisoner of war fashion on to one of the trucks and had a wonderful feeling seeing the camp from the outside. We were all pleased to be on our way to Italy, hoping that we were leaving behind for good terrible conditions like Suani Ben Ardım, its flies and the sand.

Finally, we were all ready to move and we started on our way. As we passed the camp I thought that those men who were left and who were waving us good-bye looked terrible and it was hard to realize that we had once been strong, healthy British Troops; and were now, for the most part, broken in spirit and all very thin, owing to the treatment received from the Italians.

It was grand to be on the move again, to see no barbed wire around us; to see the trees and houses which made us think of home.

I must add that this part of the country was not all desert; sometimes we passed much cultivated land and saw "Il Duce's" emigrants working on it. And so we covered the first part of our journey to Tripoli, having passed but few troops, who were for the most part Germans. We stopped after doing the four kilometres, were then formed up in threes, and after our guards had taken position, we prepared to carry on. We realized that we were going to be marched through Tripoli for propaganda purposes and we tried hard to keep in step and to try to show the "Wops" that we were British. Some of the chaps were in a bad condition and we helped them along in the best possible way. For some, the march

was too much and they collapsed and were taken the rest of the journey in trucks.

Trying to keep a decent step was too much for most of us and soon the party was just shuffling along. Getting near Tripoli, we were met by two Italian officers who were dressed "ready for the kill." They took up a position at the head of the column and eventually we arrived at Tripoli. We had not long to wait in order to see what the population thought of us for as we entered the town they were all crowded on each side of the road.

We were given an unfriendly reception and they were all keen to spit at us and to throw small stones. Hands and fists were waved at us, and shouting as they were, we knew they were not "paying compliments"! I will say, however, that I saw some who were not booing, etc. In fact, I saw quite a few of them crying, whilst others just looked at our party and I had the feeling that they were sorry for us. However, these were in the minority. We just looked at the rest of the crowd with scorn and hatred and let their booing, etc. fall on deaf ears. The town, from what we saw of it as we passed through, was filthy, and we noticed that the R.A.F. had been paying a few calls, and had done a good job of work!

Finally, we reached the place of embarkation and what damage! Great concrete slabs had been blasted away from the docks; we saw the wreckage of many ships and gutted buildings. The damage was terrific and we hoped the R.A.F. would give them more.

Early that afternoon we started to embark. The guards were doing a lot of shouting and pushing at us as we commenced to go up the gangway. I moved forward with the crowd, holding tightly to the tin of bully and biscuits which were my rations; the other tin of bully and biscuits I had eaten whilst waiting to embark. Following those in front I found myself on board and was herded to the after part of the ship where we found we were to be accommodated in the hold. The ship appeared to be of about 17,000 tons, and her previous cargo had evidently been coal, for as we crowded down into the hold we were soon covered with coal dust. We were packed in like sardines and were very soon perspiring freely.

It was estimated that the journey would take two days and so we settled down as comfortably as possible. Our voyage started

about 4 p.m. and we began to wonder what life would be like in Italy, thinking that it couldn't possibly be any worse than our life in Libya. I began to wonder what would happen if we were torpedoed and looking around the hold and seeing everyone crowded together, I thought the chances of escape would have been slim and was thankful that I happened to be very close to the stairway leading to the deck. Soon, due to our being crowded together, we began to feel cramped. Some of the chaps were really ill and I doubted whether they would live to reach Italy. The sea was very calm and the ship continued on its way whilst I cursed the sound made by its Diesel engines.

Sleep the first night was very bad and the air in the hold was hot and stuffy. Plenty of rats were running around and I hoped they were not as hungry as us. The morning mercifully came at last and we were allowed to go up the stairway to get water for drinking from a tap near the hold. During the course of the morning some of the ship's crew came and stood at the top of the hold and looked at us. We were all craving for a cigarette and by making signs got them to understand what we wanted, and after much waving on our part they threw down to us a few cigarettes, which were dived upon by all with the result that the cigarettes were quickly broken up. The day wore on and by late afternoon almost everyone had long since finished the remains of the two days' rations. We knew that we should get no more food until the following day, but we were very hungry and our constant thought was "Food!" Again, the day ended and we tried to get some sleep but throughout the night most of us were awake; myself because of my cramped position and being troubled badly by lice.

Came the 5th of August, 1942, and we prayed that our sea journey would end that day. At about nine o'clock we were lucky enough to receive our day's rations, and were also allowed on deck to get drinking water. In going to get some water I found that land was in sight and downstairs we eventually decided that it was the Isle of Capri. At 3 p.m. that afternoon we reached Naples and anchored just outside the harbour. We were then told that we would not disembark until the following day, so we had the prospect of another bad night to endure before getting off.

During the course of the evening, one of the fellows, who had



been ill throughout the voyage with dysentery, took a turn for the worse, and we started to shout for the interpreter, who eventually came. On our telling him what was the matter he said he would get the ship's Medical Officer. After some time the Medical Officer and his orderly arrived and came down into the hold in a leisurely manner and with an expression indicating that he was feeling bad tempered, probably because he had to leave a nice meal. However, on being told where the patient was, the M.O. proceeded to examine him. He then shrugged his shoulders and after speaking to his orderly, who gave the poor chap some pills, went away. At about 10 p.m. that night the prisoner died.

## CHAPTER 6

### CAPUA

WE began disembarking early on 6th August, and eventually formed up on the dockside under a very strong guard. It was then that I had my first view of Naples, and behind the large and beautiful harbour I could see the white houses, typical of Italy, stretching away into the distance, and Mount Vesuvius rising majestically in the background. Plenty of shipping lay in the harbour and everything appeared busy. There was a lot of commotion between the officers and N.C.Os., and there seemed to be many high-ranking Italian and German officers around.

We guessed that we were going to be on another "propaganda tour." Our clothes were filthy and full of lice and we all had growths of beard, and those who had sold their boots at our last camp had by now managed to wrap some sort of protection around their feet. We were looking like coalmen owing to the coal dust off the ship and were very hungry and tired.

And so we entered Naples.

There were many people waiting to see us and as we passed they spat at and booed us (but now, as I write, the laugh is on them!)

After marching through Naples for roughly half an hour we were eventually taken to a place where we were given our first

shower and had our clothes de-loused. This was a most unexpected pleasure to us, and after receiving back our clothes, which were now supposed to be free from lice, but were only slightly improved, we dressed and felt very much better. Finally, when everyone had been "de-loused," we were taken to a wired-off compound, which had evidently been a school playground. There we sat around wondering what was going to happen next and noticing that the guards were keeping good watch over us. Whilst waiting I had time to contemplate the many rumours I had heard from others about the prisoner of war camps in Italy. I had heard that each prisoner of war had a locker for his things, and that each got a Red Cross parcel a week with 50 cigarettes. After much thinking I concluded that this couldn't be possible and to receive a food parcel and cigarettes was too much wishful thinking. Later on, I found out how wrong I was. Whilst waiting, we were issued with one tin of bully and four biscuits per man for the day, and we were all in better spirits over the Italians' sudden burst of generosity in giving us two extra biscuits.

After a long period, during which most of us finished our rations except for a couple of biscuits for the journey, we were herded together and marched to the station. Although the people took pains to let us know that we were not liked, it was, for all that, grand to see civilians and well-kept land again and to see green grass, which to us looked beautiful.

Shortly after our arrival at the station, the train that was to take us on our journey drew in. As we had expected, we were to travel in cattle trucks, and soon after the train had stopped we were packed into the trucks. Into each truck was placed a sentry, and after trying to get comfortable, we waited to move. Finally, the train started off, each of us wondering whither we were bound and all looking forward to seeing our new camp and praying that conditions there would be better for us.

We passed many small stations and when I stood up to look out through the tiny window in the truck, I could see, as we flashed by, fields of grain, grape-vines, the peasants' houses and the mountains in the distance. All this helped greatly in cheering us, for instead of sand and more sand, we were looking at something which made us think of home. Our journey was interrupted now and again with

a halting and shunting, and at one of the small stations where we stopped, drinking water was issued.

I passed the rest of the journey talking to other chaps and also gazing longingly at the beautiful scenery and realizing what "Freedom" meant. I also finished off my last two biscuits and still remained famished.

We eventually reached our destination about 7 p.m. that evening, and the train pulled into one of the sidings. The guards informed us that we were staying on the train that night which obviously meant that the Italians were afraid to move us to the camp in the dark. A strong cordon of sentries was then placed around the trucks. The night was cold and being in tropical clothing and without blankets we huddled closer together trying to keep warm. Sleep was impossible and we longed for the dawn to come. Morning arrived to find us very stiff and cold and hungry. At 7 a.m. we climbed down off the train and were told to fall in on the road. Here we were counted and by the time the officer had finished, most of us had come to the conclusion that the Italians were capable of counting up to a thousand but that after a thousand it was guess work, so long did they take.

After much hanging about, during which a crowd of people gathered, we began to move off. As we went along with more and more civilians coming to look at us, I saw that their clothing was of very poor material and that most of them had wooden-soled shoes. The children were for the most part barefooted and in need, like some of their elders, of a good wash. Soon we could see the camp. At first, one could see the heavy barbed wire fencing and at each corner a sentry box. As we got nearer we could see that there were machine guns and searchlights at each corner of the camp. Inside we could see a few huts, but most of the camp seemed to be made up of tents.

I knew straight away that I would not like that camp, and it was with a sad heart that I passed through the main gate with its heavy guard and so into the camp.

## CHAPTER 7

### TRANSIT CAMP

CAMP 66 was supposed to be a Transit Camp where prisoners of war were sorted out and sent to permanent camps.

It was, as I later found out, situated about forty kilometres north of Naples, and from the camp one could just see Vesuvius rising in the distance with smoke and flames belching from its cone. The nearest place to the camp was the village of Capua which we had passed on our way up. The camp itself comprised two compounds. The top one was of huts and we could see prisoners of war in that compound, but how long they had been there and in what numbers, I could not say. The compound where I now found myself consisted of tents which accommodated fifteen men. As I have said, there were machine guns and searchlights at the corners of the camp and at different intervals along the wire stood the sentries.

On arrival, we were put fifteen to a tent and on finding where mine was I was at liberty to proceed there. I found that nine other prisoners of war had already settled in and were now lying on the floor cursing the flies, which were nearly as bad as in Libya. After sitting around with them, talking about different things for half an hour, I decided to look over the camp. I soon found the wash-house which was not too bad, and the water was plentiful. I then found the cookhouse and was pleased to note that there was smoke coming from the chimneys, which I thought, was a good sign. Whilst I was standing there, I saw one of the prisoners coming out of the cookhouse, and with a grin he told me that he had been nominated as one of the cooks, and that for cooking he would be getting extra rations! It happened that our chaps were to do the cooking and on asking him when we ate, he replied about 1 p.m., and also that we would be getting our issue of bread for the day, which was 200 grms., and that our meal at noon would be soup. With this good news I made my way back to the tent and told the boys. It cheered them greatly and soon all the camp knew and were waiting for the "Go." At 12 noon we were organized into

squads of 90 and were told that each would stay in his particular squad until such time as we left the camp.

The dinner came and as each man approached the dixie where one of the cooks was ladling out, he was given a mess tin and spoon. It was as I had been told—soup!—and although it was a disgrace to be called such, it was for all that very welcome and warm, and I felt better afterwards. After soup we received our penny bun and 60 grms. of cheese, which was quickly finished. We could not call it a good meal, but it helped, and although we were always hungry and could have eaten a large meal, we were almost able to control the pangs of hunger.

In the afternoon we were paraded and told by the Commandant, who didn't seem to be too severe a chap, that we had to have all our hair off and that if there were any barbers amongst us, would they step forward? They would be given the tools and for their work they would get an extra bread issue. There was quite a rush forward and soon the barbers had been chosen and were ready to start. The Commandant then told us of the camp routine and the penalty for trying to escape, after which we were dismissed and the barbers started their work.

I decided to get my hair cut before there was too much of a crowd and shortly afterwards made my way back to the tent, feeling, and no doubt looking, like "convict 99."

The day drew to its close and it quickly got cold and the mosquitoes, which were plentiful, were soon biting us to death. I decided to turn in and after removing my boots, which I used for a pillow, I lay down on the hard, uneven ground and tried to sleep. I lay awake most of the night, tormented by mosquitoes, lice, and the cold.

The following morning we were roused at dawn and were soon lining up in the cold morning air for our breakfast, which consisted of a ladle full of ersatz coffee. The rest of the time until dinner was spent in the tent until the sun began to warm the air when we sat outside "thawing out." Dinner time came and when we heard the cry from the cooks, "Skilly up!" we raced along to draw our soup, bread and cheese.

After dinner we were paraded, and were given two blankets each and went back to our tents with big smiles on our faces. We

existed only for our next meal. That afternoon a strong rumour began to go round the compound that we were to get Red Cross parcels and 50 cigarettes. However, all this seemed too good, and we were about to forget it, when suddenly we were shouted at from outside.

On forming up, we were informed by our camp R.S.M. whom we had elected to look after our welfare (!) that we were going to get an issue of Red Cross parcels, one between ten, on the following morning. He told us that when supplies came through we would have one each per week, but that at the moment we had to be content with one between ten. After he had described the contents of the parcels, we were dismissed. I walked back "as if on air" with visions of a cup of tea before me and some real English food.

The rest of the afternoon everyone was talking about the parcels, and if the war had ended, I doubt if it could have made us happier than we were then.

The time came and we lined up for our meal and whilst waiting for my ration, I looked around and noticed the terrible condition of us all. Everyone was thin and it was possible to count the ribs of those who, because of the heat, had their shirts off; all had gaunt faces, hollowed cheeks and rounded shoulders. Some of the chaps were too weak with dysentery to walk, and their pals collected their rations for them. It was then that I was thankful to the Red Cross, for without their help I doubt if many of us would now be alive. That evening I took a stroll with my friend around the compound and here and there were groups of fellows talking about the parcels.

The lights came on and made the camp look like daylight and once in a while the sentries at the corners of the camp would swing their searchlights on to the many groups who were walking around. Soon it got too cold and I made my way to the tent. We all slept better that night but, as usual, the lice were on night duty!

At last the great day arrived, and after receiving our coffee we sat huddled in our blankets, waiting for the parcels. At 7 a.m. we were paraded for roll call, and when the Italian officer was satisfied that none of the "happy party" had escaped, he departed. The R.S.M., or "camp leader," as he was now known, informed us that we were to group ourselves into tens and when the time came

to issue the parcels, one representative of each group would draw the parcel. He asked for volunteers to help collect and open the parcels, and after getting a ready response, the rest of us were dismissed. My pal and I went back to the tent and after a talk, ten of us decided to share a parcel, and as I was the only N.C.O. in the tent, they gave me the honour of drawing it. At 9 a.m. the issue of parcels commenced and with the boys shouting "Get a good one," I went forward to join the "parcel trustees."

Whilst waiting my turn, I noticed that there were two Italian officers and a number of sentries near the tables watching the parcels being issued. As each man went forward to get the parcel, the contents were emptied on to the table and all the tins were "stabbed" by one of the Italians and placed into the box again. When this was completed, the parcel was handed over and away went the trustee as fast as he could, to his eager, waiting group. Also standing around watching were a crowd of the prisoners. Eventually, I received ours, and went away holding the parcel and cigarettes as if they were gold. When I entered the tent the lads showered me with questions and after telling them to gather round I took off the lid, and what a sight for hungry stomachs! Before going further, we issued out the cigarettes, and after one of the chaps had got a light from one of the sentries, we sat around enjoying a smoke and deciding how to share out the contents of the parcel.

I was given the difficult task of fairly sharing out a ten-pound parcel to ten hungry men, who were "all eyes." The contents consisted of two tins of meat, tea, tin of cheese,  $\frac{1}{4}$ -lb. of chocolate, tinned milk, packet of yorkshire pudding and other items. Finally, the hard job was finished and everyone was satisfied with his share. We decided to leave the tea, sugar and milk as it was and to make a "brew" for ten.

After the parcel had been shared and with us smoking and eating a piece of chocolate at the same time, we voted on who was to "brew up." Two of the ten then collected the empty box and two mess tins and went off to make the tea. One of them decided that there wasn't sufficient fuel for the "brew," so he calmly collected some of the wooden tent pegs from the next tent, whilst the occupants were still busy with their parcel. The following day I found

that someone had done the same trick to us, and soon there was a big shortage of tent pegs in the camp, so much so that when the Commandant later found this out, he threatened to stop the next parcel issue. However, come hail or snow, the "brew must go on," and soon our "brewers" had returned with the tea, triumphant.

A ten-pound parcel doesn't go far between ten men and soon after the tea was brought in, we had finished the lot, all feeling very much bloated and because the food was too rich for us, three of the chaps were violently sick, but we all agreed that it was worth it and looked forward to the next issue.

After lying on the floor of the tent with a blanket underneath me for some time, I decided to take a walk around. In one of the corners I saw a crowd of people sitting, kneeling and lying down, making their tea.

There was smoke and more smoke and some were burning Red Cross boxes, others were burning rags and paper, while others were using tent pegs, all intent on making a cup of tea and all the time puffing and blowing away at their fires. Some kept taking off the lids of their mess tins, waiting patiently for the water to boil, with broad grins and with tears caused by the smoke running down their faces.

I took my leave of the scene and continued walking.

There were plenty of prisoners of war in groups talking of what they had received in their respective parcels, and all were puffing away at English cigarettes. There were still quite a number who had to have a haircut, and these were now standing around the barbers, who were making quick work of them.

I saw others washing themselves and their clothes at the wash-place, and as we had not yet received a soap issue I surmised that they had been the lucky ones who had won the bars of soap from the parcels.

I went back to the tent to find some of the boys de-lousing; with their shirts off they were trying to exterminate the ever-present lice, and now and again remarking, "Blimey, look at this Mark II!"

Very soon I was thus engaged myself and we continued the battle until dinner time. Away we went for our "swill," and I heard that two more chaps had died, one from malnutrition, the other from dysentery. I made my way back in deep thought,



realizing that, with only the soup, 200 grms. of bread and 60 grms. of cheese, our chances of survival, without the parcels, were less than half.

So the time in Camp 66 passed. Roll call at 6 a.m. each morning revealed a number of deaths each week and many men in the camp hospital. Always, we were troubled with lice, and at night with mosquitoes.

There was no reading material in the camp nor any games, and for most of the time we just sat around longing for the day when we should move to a permanent camp. The happiest days at 66 were when we received our issue of parcels, for then we had something to do.

A lot of time was spent by all trying to collect wood or anything that would burn, and before we finally left the camp the wooden poles supporting the barbed wire were stripped clean of their bark and in a number of cases the poles went, too.

The sentries were always shouting and threatening us but with no effect. When we were unlucky enough to be caught doing something wrong it meant a spell of solitary confinement and sometimes the loss of one's parcel share, according to the crime.

Eventually, the Commandant, who had now stopped the parcel issue a number of times and found that this didn't end the destruction we were causing, finally agreed to give us some wood for "brewing," and soon there was even more smoke.

During our time there we were able to find out who were the "good" sentries and we all devised ways and means of getting extra food. For instance, we would empty a tin of cocoa and fill it up with earth and with half an inch of cocoa on top we would barter it with a good sentry in exchange for a 200-grm. loaf. When they found out they had been tricked we would forget about the cocoa and think of another way of getting food. And so it went on, until finally the sentries had had enough.

After a few weeks' stay at Camp 66, there came a large consignment of parcels, and we were later able to enjoy one between five twice a week. As a result of a little extra good English food, we began to get better in health and whilst we didn't put on very much weight, the number of deaths and illnesses began to decrease

and the "blackouts" or giddiness, which we had previously had, were now not so frequent.

The treatment we received there was a lot better than that we had experienced in the camps in Libya, but this was probably because we were now under the "protection of the International Red Cross," who visited the camps every three months. However, the Italians often used to try and wear us down. Sometimes when the Commandant was in a bad temper, he would order a roll call and would keep us on parade all the morning. At other times the roll call would be in the afternoon, in the hot sun. At other times the wood which we had to cook our food with was sent into the camp late, with the result that on quite a few occasions we would get our evening meal very late.

So the days passed. We were always lousy and were experiencing one of the worst things one can suffer—boredom.

I soon knew by heart every inch of the country that it was possible to see from the camp, with the main road and the little, white, peasant's house at its turn. At night the camp became alive with searchlights, and the sentries swept every spot of it with them. When anyone was going to the latrines in the night he would instantly be "picked up" in the searchlight beam and followed back in it until he disappeared inside his tent. Some nights we would lay awake and talk; on occasions about the war and where, in our opinion, the fighting was, or we would relate to each other how we had become prisoners; at other times it would be about our homes and people in England, and eventually we would finish up talking about our usual topic—food.

Sometimes one would lie awake late at night and when all the camp was sleeping one could "feel" the stillness of it, and now and again one would hear the measured tread of the sentries. We were allowed to write home once a week, and the greatest day in Camp 66 was when the first batch of mail arrived, with our people now knowing, after weeks of anxiety, that we were alive, even if prisoners. Once a week we had a meat day and on Sundays when we lined up for our evening meal we would get a very small portion of meat, if lucky.

On Sundays we would hold our own church services which were always well attended. On Sunday evenings most of us would

gather around the cookhouse hoping that we might get a meat bone. The cooks now looked very well and we all knew that they were eating some of our rations. However, I doubt if one could really blame them for they worked hard and I think that if we had been in their position we would have been tempted to do the same.

Often we had searches in the camp when the Italians would come around seeking anything that would serve to our advantage as a weapon, and also hoping that they would find something worth keeping.

All of us now had the edges of our spoons sharpened for the purpose of opening the tins in the parcels and also to cut our penny buns with. When these searches took place the shout of "Live Rabbits!" would be heard, and upon this, we would all hide everything with the result that the searches were usually unsuccessful. On 16th October we were paraded and informed by the camp leader that we were moving the following day. Feeling much happier, we spent the day collecting what little we had and also handing in our two blankets. That night we had very little sleep for without our two blankets we were extremely cold.

## CHAPTER 8

### MACERATO

THE morning of 16th October, 1942, came at last and after collecting together whatever we possessed, we had our "coffee" and waited. At 7 a.m. we were counted and when our names were called out made our way to the gate where we were given a parcel each and a day's issue of bread (200 grms.), and with these we lined up outside under a heavy guard. We eventually moved off and, marching down the road, I had a last look at Camp 66 where it had been my misfortune to have been confined from 8th August until 16th October, 1942. Where we were bound for was anyone's guess, but we hoped that our new abode would be better. We arrived at Capua station and proceeded to fill up the cattle trucks which were waiting for us there. Soon, we were on our way to our next camp and were passing through beautiful scenery. The harvest of

wheat was ready for cutting and in the distance one could see the snow-capped mountains with the sun shining down on them.

During the journey we were busy eating our parcel contents and the sentry was looking on enviously for it was evident that he had not seen chocolate, jam, etc., for a long time. After about two hours, I noticed that the sentry, of all people, was asleep like some of the prisoners. One of our number suddenly had an idea which he quickly told those of us who were awake. We collected what empty tins we could and into these we put paper; another chap produced a box of matches (where he had got them from no one cared) and the paper in the tins was lit. All the time we kept a very wary eye on the sentry, but he wasn't interested! Then through the small windows we threw the tins which fell amongst the very ripe grain by the railway edge. We wondered whether our idea would work but quite soon afterwards as the train was taking a bend we were very pleased to see the harvest on fire in the distance. We were all very pleased with ourselves, feeling that, in our own small way, we were hitting back at the "Wops."

Throughout the journey, and during the times that the sentry was having a nap, we continued our good work until eventually we had run short of tins, but not before we had set fire to quite a few grain fields. We arrived at our destination on the afternoon of 17th October, and found that the name of the place was Macerato. This large town, as I later found out, was in the north-east of Italy. We were evidently unexpected visitors to the civilians for, as we clambered off the train and lined up on the road nearby, quite a crowd gathered around, looking at us as if we were "men from Mars." We certainly didn't look much like soldiers! We started on our way after the Italians had found out that "all were present," and could soon see our new camp which was named Camp 53. From the outside it looked to be a good camp and we wondered what the food was like.

## CAMP 53

CAMP 53, where I was destined to stay until June of the following year, was composed of three compounds, each one large enough to house 2,000 prisoners of war. We were about 1,500 strong and were put into No. 1 Compound. The compound was itself split up into other buildings and in each of these buildings were accommodated 600 prisoners of war. After a lot of shouting by our new guards and officers, we were eventually sorted out. I found myself, along with 600 more, in a large room which was later to be known as "B Block." Inside our new quarters we found three-tier wooden beds with a straw mattress, two blankets, and an eating bowl with a spoon. We were busy for some time "grabbing a bed" and getting together with our different pals. Eventually, this was accomplished and I began to look around. Except for the beds, the room was very bare with no fires or any such luxury. The walls were damp and I knew that if we were there for the winter it would be very cold. As there was nothing else on, I decided to have a look around. Opposite our hut was the camp infirmary, and at the top of the compound was the cookhouse. This was a vast improvement on our last camp, and as a result the food was somewhat better. I was very surprised to find out that Nos. 1 and 2 Compounds were not yet finished, and I could see the workmen on the job. Adjoining the camp was a large recreational field but throughout the winter it was only used for roll calls.

The camp was surrounded with plenty of barbed wire and many sentry boxes complete with sentries, machine guns and searchlights. I soon found the washplace, which seemed to be O.K. except for the fact that the water was not always on! I had been hoping to get a bath at our new camp, but my hopes came to nothing when it was found that the baths, too, were far from being completed. I very soon found out that our beds were full of bugs and so we now had partners for our beloved lice! Our first few days there were spent in getting our clothing deloused, but with the "Wops" doing the job, we only had more eggs hatched out, and it soon became a common practice to sit outside in the sunshine and try to delouse ourselves.

We soon got to know who were the "good" officers and sentries in the camp, but we also learnt that our new Commandant was a strong Fascist and did not like us. The food here was somewhat better and we ran the camp on the same lines as Camp 66. We voted for a new Camp Leader who was responsible for our welfare, and he proved to be good. I, like the rest, was pleased to find out through the Camp Leader that there was a sufficient amount of parcels in the stores to last us a few weeks at one per man per week, and in the meantime we hoped the Commandant would send for the next consignment. We began to settle down and gradually got used to the new camp rules and ways. We began to feel better now that we were getting a parcel each. Someone started to make a stove for brewing purposes from the empty parcel tins, and very soon most everyone was imbued with the new idea.

During the time that the stoves were being made there was much banging in the huts, which used to last all day. Later on, we got into the habit of making different things, such as trays, etc., and finally the Camp Leader issued an order that there would be "no knocking after 2 p.m." Each day saw a crowd around the cook-house collecting the wood chips for fuel, and often someone came very near to having his head off when he tried to grab a nice chip of wood just as the wood-cutter was bringing down the axe!

However, so valuable was wood that many chaps took risks like that, just to get some for the "brew."

Prisoner of war camps were always full of rumours and we eventually established our own newspaper and into this was put all the rumours of the day. Also "helpful hints" on how to make a good stove, or a better way to ease the "louse menace." As the paper was usually put up outside one of the billets first thing in the morning there was always soon afterwards a large crowd of us gathered around waiting to read it, and it was one of the joys of prisoner of war life.

The wood situation became acute, and before very long we were burning the boards from our beds (or someone else's). The wooden stakes holding some of the barbed wire were soon stripped of the bark and all day long we hunted for wood as well as lice!

Reveille was at 6 a.m. and shortly afterwards we would hear

the shout "Come and get it," and at this, 600 men would soon be rushing outside, rain, hail or snow.

We would start off the day by receiving our breakfast, the usual cup of ersatz coffee. We had all by now made ourselves a cup from a tin out of the parcels. Each dixie in which the coffee came up was sufficient for 45 men and we had now become squads of 45. These squads had been named and I found myself in charge of Squad 2 of "B" Troop. Each night I would detail two men from my squad and the following morning they would be responsible for bringing the coffee, bread and also the evening meal. After all the squad had been given their coffee the first men to receive extra were the two "carriers"—if there was any left!

After "breakfast" and folding up my two blankets, I would proceed for a wash, and after a long wait, together with a lot of pushing, I would eventually get to the tap and sometimes, just as I was about to wash, the water would be turned off. Because of this, most of us started to fill our eating bowls with water the previous night so that we would be sure of getting a wash the following day.

At about 7.30 a.m. the Camp Leader would blow his whistle and we would then have to make our way to the field, where we would fall in for roll call. Sometimes we were out there for an hour and at times, when the Commandant was in a bad temper, we would be kept there for quite some time. We went on to the field for roll call in all weathers and as a result of our getting soaked when it was raining and with having, as yet, no other clothing, quite a few caught pneumonia and died in the camp infirmary as a result.

On occasions like this, and when we were dismissed, we would make our way to our miserable quarters and there the wisest of us would strip off and get into bed—such as it was.

At 10.30 a.m. our 200 grms. of bread and 60 grms. of cheese would be issued out and with the help of the parcel, we managed to stave off for a time the ever-present hunger.

At 3 p.m. there would be another roll call and after that we would sit around or delouse ourselves whilst waiting for the last meal of the day which, had we been at home, would not have been fit for the dog. However, it was hot, and at about 6 p.m. I would start to issue my platoon with their rations. After I had finished the

last man, there would always be some waiting in the hope that there would be a little extra. So I made out a list and when there was any food left (which was rare) and after I had given the carriers their extras, I would start on my list and thereby ensure that each of us got the same.

Till now we had been without any kind of reading material and naturally we endured severe boredom. As a result, quite a few gave up the will to live and so died. Nearly every other day someone died, mostly through malnutrition or dropsy, pneumonia, etc.

We got used to standing outside our billets during the winter of 1942, paying our respects to one of our number who had died, and as a result we got hardened and so used to this sort of thing that when we later went back into the hut one would often (above the din of others banging at tins) hear the remark: "I wonder who will be next!" Had we not received Red Cross parcels most of us—and I say this in all seriousness—would now be dead.

Before the summer finished we would sit outside in the sunshine talking and sometimes taking a walk around the field. Like our last camp, we became familiar with the surrounding countryside and could see in the distance the snow-capped mountains. I little knew then that later on I should be hiding in those mountains. Eventually the winter came and we would go to bed, getting little sleep because of the lice, cold and bugs. On nights like this I lay awake thinking of home and freedom and hearing all kinds of snoring. I would also hear others muttering and moaning during a restless sleep. During the day we would do all kinds of things in an effort to pass away the time, and one of my "hobbies" was to try to characterize a person, then speak with him and see if I were anywhere near right.

On days when it rained we would be in our hut and as there were 600 men in there, one can imagine the noise, especially when most of them were busy banging away at tins, or trying to chop some bits of wood with an old tip from a boot.

At night we were allowed to walk in the compound until 9 p.m., and the sentries often played the searchlights amongst us and now and again a couple of guards would walk in the compound, just to make sure everything was in order. At 9 p.m. we had to be indoors and if anyone were found walking around after that time, he would



be shot at. Until November we were in the camp by ourselves, and by then the other compounds had been finished.

On parcel days we would draw our parcel and would often go into the compound to the auction. This was always a big day for us and I would often take something, such as a tin of cocoa, to the auction and eventually it would be put up for sale and I would listen for the best offer. I would probably be offered so many cigarettes or two tins of cheese in exchange for the cocoa. The rest of the chaps would be doing the same. More often than not we exchanged the articles, not because we really wanted to, but it passed away the time and one was always sure of a laugh there.

Early in November there came to our camp another 1,500. To go to No. 2 Compound they passed through ours. We hung around waiting for them to come through the gate in the hope that some of our friends might be amongst them. Finally, they came in. They were in a very bad way and their clothes were filthy. They shuffled past us, some with boots and others without. They were very thin and quite a few were obviously dying. After they had gone through, the compound gate was closed, and a sentry was on duty to prevent us from going into No. 2 Compound. The following day many of them were admitted to the camp infirmary and many died.

We were as yet without Red Cross medical kit, and the Italians had little to spare. The Camp Leader made an appeal for anything that would serve as bandages, and more than once the hospital orderlies had no rags to dress the many wounded. Luckily, we received a big consignment of parcels and these were soon issued out to No. 2 Compound. We also received "milk parcels," and these saved the lives of quite a few of the hospital patients. Gradually, with the help of the parcels, the health of the men in the other compound began to improve.

The winter was hard and we were still without warm clothing and, until March, 1943, most of us were wearing the clothes we had been captured in. Our people had been informed that they could send us a "next of kin" parcel once every three months and these would, for the most part, be made up of clothing. Also, they were told, we were allowed as many cigarettes as possible and also books and games.

The first consignment of "next of kin" parcels arrived early in January, 1943. We all listened to the names of the lucky ones called out, and I found that I was one of them. We were marched to the stores and in the presence of an Italian officer our parcels were opened. Anything that resembled civilian clothing in any way was taken from the parcel and the unfortunate person would be given a receipt for the same—but that was the last one saw of the clothing. After receiving my parcel I and the others were marched back. Inside our hut we were crowded by the not so lucky ones who wanted to see what the "next of kin" parcel was like. Besides warm clothing in mine and a pair of boots, there was something which to us was even more important, and that was chocolate. I shared some of this amongst my pals and we then sat around examining the clothing. There was a chap from the next platoon who received a "next of kin" parcel at the same time as myself. In it was 2½ lb. of chocolate, which he ate at one go. The following day he was in hospital, where he later died from "over eating," having burst the lining of his stomach. I remember another case during the winter, when we were without cigarettes. One of the chaps in my platoon smoked a quarter of a pound of tea from his parcel and later died from "yellow jaundice."

So time in 53 passed with the days long and cold, with lousiness, no proper washing facilities, men dying, and constant boredom. The third compound was now occupied and the health of the camp was a lot better, but we were still a long way from being fit. Christmas began to draw near and the Camp Leader asked for people to act in the pantomime which was being arranged. The response was good and for some time before Christmas there was a lot of activity by the actors preparing the show. Christmas Day arrived and we were issued with our parcels and also a special "Christmas parcel" and that day we ate really well. In the evening the pantomime, "Ali Baba and his Four Cronies," was staged in one of the huts. The beds had been put outside in the compound and to watch the show we sat on a blanket which each man brought along. The show provided a good laugh and was enjoyed by all.

Soon, Christmas Day was a day passed by and the dreary weeks wore on. The winter was now "fully on" and most of us had given

up our daily wash for, due to our weakened constitutions and the cold, it was very easy to get pneumonia. So we decided it was better to have more lice and be dirtier than to risk, like many did, the possibility of getting pneumonia, for it was surprising how easy one could get a cold

I washed about three times a week and looked forward to the time when I could get a decent bath. January came and we were now getting more mail, "next of kin" and book parcels; also, the first consignment of medical and sports kit started to arrive and things began at last to improve.

Nearly every day someone was punished for various things, such as burning all his bed boards, etc. By February the weather started to improve and we managed to get some exercise on the field. Then came the day when the baths were opened and we had a hot shower for the first time, and everyone began to feel better. On the nice days we were now able to sit outside reading a book and those books were a godsend to us.

At the end of February came a big consignment of clothing and a few days later we were in decent clothing, but still lousy!

It was about that time that we ran short of parcels and for three weeks we were hoping that "tomorrow they might arrive." The boys began to follow the sentries and officers around, and when they threw away their cigarette ends there would be a wild rush for them. However, after our longest wait as yet, for parcels, they came in after a lapse of three weeks, and I shall not forget the day when one of the chaps came rushing into the room and shouted "They're in!" and from the amount of cheering one would have thought that the war was won.

The only news we received of the progress of the war was when someone managed to get an Italian paper from somewhere. This was then given to our Camp Interpreter and he would translate the news into English. Next it was passed to one of the Sergeants who would come around in the evening, and whilst some of the chaps acted as lookouts for the sentries, he would read out the news. On occasions when the sentries were seen walking to the hut the lookouts would shout "Live Rabbit," which meant trouble, and we would all try to act normally until the "Wops" had gone. About once a fortnight we were given what was known as the

*P.O.W. News.* This was a small newspaper printed by the Italians for the purpose of propaganda and reading it one wondered how England managed to carry on!

During my stay at 53 the camp was searched on many occasions by the Italian Military Police. When these searches took place, we would be sent out into the field, and with the sentries there to make sure that we didn't go back to the huts, the police would have a search which often lasted all day. When we were coming off the field we would be searched ourselves, and when the police saw any gold rings or knives the unfortunate owners would lose them. After a time, we got wise to their searchings and found various ways of hiding whatever we wanted to. We hid rings, watches, etc., in our boots, stitched in our clothing or under our tongues. Eventually, we would get back into the huts and find the place upside down, parcels tipped over, straw on the floor from one's paillasse, and after much cursing we would eventually sort ourselves out and once again bring out our knives and rings, etc.

March came and the days were now warm. The weather helped a lot and soon the morale of the camp went higher. We were now able to sit outside without being cold, and we could enjoy a smoke and a read in the sunshine, and if we wished we could delouse.

As the parcels from the Red Cross and from home, together with the mail, were arriving regularly, we began to get quite well off for cigarettes. Soon, one could see "card schools" going in the compound, with men playing for cigarettes instead of something which we had forgotten about—money.

The weather was now better and, thanks to the parcels and the sports kit which was now arriving, we were able to enjoy life a little more.

We organized "camp sports," but if anyone could run 220 yards he was considered very fit.

Many of the chaps were now quite experts in the art of "tin craft," and so we held our "arts and crafts" exhibitions. Some of the work at these shows was remarkable considering that all that one possessed in the way of tools was a tip off a boot or, if one were luckier, a pair of scissors. One of the lads in my platoon who in civilian life had been a watchmaker was able, with the help of a pair of scissors, to make a grandfather clock. This clock was

made entirely of Red Cross tins, and when it was finished adorned the wall of our large billet and in twenty-four hours lost about eight minutes. When the Commandant heard about the clock he was very interested and came to see it for himself one afternoon.

About this time the Italians came around asking for volunteers for working camps. They painted a very nice picture about extra food and being able to go to a theatre once in a while. The response to their appeal was very poor and we were then told that we were going to be detailed to go. We at once complained to the Camp Leader and later on we were informed by him that the Italians could detail us to go out working, but it must be work that was not directly war work.

Very often the Camp Leader would send out the lists of the people for work. We would all sit and listen to one of the Sergeants calling out names and everyone hoping that his name would not be called. As fast as the working parties left, other prisoners of war would come into the camp. Some of the new arrivals were captured in Tunisia and soon we would get to know how the war was progressing and also we heard of our Army's new weapons and superiority.

Occasionally we had pilots and air crews come to the camp and from them we would get to know many things. One of the pilots who arrived in the camp had been shot down the previous day. He told us that two days prior to that he was in England and soon we had our reporters on the job, getting to know all about home and the price of beer, cigarettes, etc., and was it true that England was short of this or that. The news that he gave us was excellent and the morale of the camp went higher.

All the time fresh parties were going out and on 28th May, 1943, I heard my name called out for a working party which was leaving on 2nd June, 1943. The total number of the party was 70. Soon we were busy getting together our kits and handing back our blankets.

I said good-bye to many of the pals I was leaving behind and on the morning of the 2nd we were up at 6 a.m. and started to hand in our mattresses. We were then paraded and were given our coffee and thence followed a roll call. As we started to move through the main gate, we were individually searched and when this was over we found ourselves under a strong guard formed up outside the

camp and feeling very lost. We started to march to the station, taking our last look at Camp 53 as we went along. We began to wonder whither we were bound and what work we were going to do. Eventually, we reached the station and received a very big surprise. Before we knew what has happening we found ourselves in comfortable carriages, six to a compartment, with also racks on which to put our kit. As I said, this was a big surprise to us for we had been expecting to travel in cattle trucks. Anyway, we were satisfied and no questions were asked, and at 10 a.m. we started on our way. A few moments later I was having my last look at the camp, little realizing that I would be seeing it again later on in very different circumstances. The guards walked along the corridor frequently and at every station that we approached they made us pull down the blinds. Once again, we passed beautiful scenery and often travelled near the Adriatic Sea. On passing some of the stations we took a chance and left the blinds up, and so occasionally, were able to see the damage wrought by the R.A.F.

Later on, we stopped at one station and, leaving the blinds up and at the same time keeping our eyes on the sentries, we found we were in Bologna station. Inside it we saw a troop train carrying Germans.

They appeared to be on their way to the front and whilst one was playing the accordion, some were singing. Others were being given some sort of a meal by a cook. At the rear of the train were the tanks and trucks.

We started off again and towards 4 p.m. that day we were informed by one of the guards that we were nearing our destination. Soon afterwards the train pulled into a small station and on looking out of the window we discovered we were at Isola della Scala, which we later found was ten miles south-east of Verona, in the north of Italy. We were warned to detrain and shortly afterwards were waiting on the platform. On the platform were some Italian civilians waiting for their train. As soon as they learned that we were prisoners of war they eagerly crowded around, staring at us. We were now quite used to being looked upon as though we were animals so consequently took no notice of them.

Presently we saw three horses and carts coming to the station and were informed that we were to travel to the camp on them.

We put our kits on to one of the carts and when that was finished were ordered on to the other two. Our new guards had come down with the horses and carts and they now took over from the others. They seemed to be quite decent chaps, and when shortly afterwards we started on our way, they seemed quite eager to talk to us and to say what a good camp we were going to. On learning that there would only be 70 of us in the camp we were quite pleased. Some of the sentries were walking by the sides of the carts as we went along the main road. The thought of our riding and their walking gave us a good laugh and they, seeing the funny side, laughed back.

We entered the town of Isola della Scala and soon were being pointed at with crowds following us along. This gave the impression that we were in a carnival with crowds watching us. The people themselves seemed happy enough and the shops appeared to be full, especially with fruit. However, I noticed that like the people of the south, they were not too well off regarding clothing and shoes.

Presently we left the town and were now in the country. We could see the orchards and the loads of grapes and plenty of people working in the fields. In one field I saw were young boys and girls working together hoeing, and they were singing. The harmony was good and it was nice to see and hear someone enjoying life. All the people were working barefooted and now and again I would hear the ploughman with his oxen shouting "Gammina," which we later learned meant "Go on."

It was nice to be travelling in the country and to see the very beautiful scenery with, far away to the north, the snow-capped Alps with the sun shining on them.

We turned off the road after having covered about four to five kilometres and proceeded down a country lane. On our way we passed the "Vino Shop" or, as they are known, "La Spacios," with their gaily-coloured bricks. We were told by the guard that we were nearing the camp and when we did see it were more than surprised. We had visualized our new camp to have the usual barbed wire, searchlights and machine guns, but to our surprise we found ourselves in the courtyard of a large farm and we started to look around for the camp.

We saw oxen, sheep, hens and horses, and everything else that makes up a farm. The peasants who worked there stood idly around watching us.

We were seeing the camp!

## CHAPTER 10

### WORKING CAMP

It was part of the farm, and surrounding it was barbed wire, but nothing like that we had previously seen. We were ordered down from the carts and were soon busy sorting out our kits. We then entered our new abode, which consisted of a large room, upstairs, with whitewashed walls. In it were the three-tier wooden beds, complete with two blankets, paillasse and eating bowl. There was plenty of room for each man to sit up in bed, and for the person sleeping on the top bunks there was a small ladder by the side for climbing to his bunk. The top bunks were about 9 ft. from the ground. There was plenty of space in the room and ventilation, but I noticed that there was barbed wire on the outside of the window framing. Tied to each bed was a small shelf for the use of the occupant. Adjoining our room was a smaller one. This was to be the camp hospital. Inside there were two camp beds ready for use and I noticed there were also sheets. The walls were whitewashed and, like the big room, the floor was of wood.

We began to make ourselves comfortable and a friend and I occupied two top bunks. After having sorted our kit out and having seen our quarters upstairs, we decided to have a look downstairs. On going down the stairs we saw facing us a small cooking range and a few feet away from this was a shower and two ablutions for washing. Near here, also, were the latrines. Then we entered another room and this, we guessed, was the "dining hall," for there were some tables and forms inside. As in the upstairs room the window frames were quite heavily covered with barbed wire. Next we saw a very small room with a stone floor and no windows. The door was very solid with three bars covering a small window. This, we concluded, was the "cell." The camp was fitted with electric



lights. We next went outside and found ourselves in a small yard. It was about 40 feet in length and 16 feet in width. Then there was the barbed wire, and at the corner were two sentry boxes with sentries on duty. Adjoining the camp were quarters for the guard which consisted of twenty men.

Later on we were paraded outside in the yard and there met the Commandant. He was a young chap and from the time I saw him I took a dislike to him. He then, with the aid of one of our chaps who had been detailed as Camp Interpreter, told us that if we co-operated with him, things would be all right and he would try to make our life as prisoners of war easier. If we didn't do as we were told and didn't help him, he would make things harder.

He said that we would be going to work the following day and that those who refused would be sent to a "punishment camp." He hoped we liked our quarters and that we would not, for our own sakes, cause trouble. We were then dismissed. Shortly afterwards we were told to elect our Camp Leader, and as we had a Sergeant with us whom we knew to be a good chap, we duly elected him. We then had to elect four Squad Leaders, and being an N.C.O., I found myself one of the chosen four. We then organized ourselves into four squads and I was in charge of No. 1 Squad. Whilst all this had been going on our new cook and his assistant were busy getting our meal ready. Whilst we were waiting we brewed ourselves some tea and were also pleased to learn that there were enough parcels for us. Our meal was soon ready and we were served by the cook, with No. 1 Squad going first. It was wonderful to have plenty of room and not to be crowded. Our rations were doubled, and instead of one, we were now getting two loaves a day (400 grms.). Our Camp Leader that night collected all the information from the Commandant and we learned that our working hours were from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with a break from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. for meals and because of the heat. We were to be paid 20 lire per day, and we were soon surprised when we found out that out of our 20 lire 16 would be deducted to pay for our billets, so that left us with four lire!

This would then be put to our credit and at the end of each month the Commandant would send in our canteen, consisting of razor blades, pencils, fruit, etc. When we had bought what we

wanted, which was very dear, the cost would be reckoned up and we would be told how much money was left in credit. For instance, if a man worked 12 days, his credit, after the "rent" had been stopped, would be 44 lire. When he had bought his requirements at the canteen, he would be told that a mirror was 16 lire, etc., and so when he had finished buying he would know how much money was left in credit to spend (if any!)

We slept soundly that night, in spite of the lice, and at 5.30 a.m. the following day were roused by the guards.

After washing and making our beds tidy we went downstairs and drew our coffee which we would swallow, together with something out of our parcels, such as a couple of biscuits. We then waited eagerly to be taken to work, and at 6.45 a.m. the Camp Leader called the four squads downstairs. We were feeling cheerful, knowing that the disease so far experienced—boredom—would now pass and that with working, the time and days would pass quickly. We also knew we would be a lot fitter.

My squad were first out of the camp, and I fell them in and waited for the two sentries, who were going with us, to tell me to march the squad off. Soon we started and we felt very free and gay as we marched along the lane to work, with the sentries following in the rear. We passed a number of peasants who bid us "bon giorno," or "good morning." I was glad that morning that my name had been called out for work at 53 for I now felt more like an individual. After about ten minutes' good walking we reached our place of work. On entering a field which was being planted with tobacco one could see the peasants at work.

The sentry shouted to the foreman who was soon advancing to start us to work. His name was "Julio," and he was about 43 years of age. He told the sentry what he wanted us to do and then the sentry started to try to tell me. Owing to our not understanding each other, it was only after quite some time and with much sign language that I finally understood what was to be done. Half of the squad was soon working with the civilians planting tobacco, some of the others were watering the plants, and the remaining few were hoeing.

Whilst the boys were working, the sentry often said "do this" or "do that," and I manfully tried to understand Italian.

The morning passed quickly and we soon stopped work and marched back for dinner. Arriving in camp we found our dinner of thin soup and our two small loaves and cheese ready for us. We also had a cup of tea, the tea being pooled by each man in the squad and brewed by the cook. When this had been eaten and, still hungry, most of us went upstairs to have our siesta. I was quickly fast asleep and it was all too soon when we were called at 3 p.m. for work. The sun was very hot and we went back perspiring freely.

We carried on working and were glad when the sun began to lose its heat. During the afternoon one of the peasants was continually coming around with drinking water. The foreman would walk behind examining our work, and more than once he got very excited. On going back to investigate, I found him pointing to some of the plants. These had been washed out of the ground by one of the squad who was supposed to be watering them but, from appearances, had simply emptied a bucket of water on them. Occasionally, we were allowed to enjoy a few minutes' break for smoking.

At 7 p.m. the sentries marched us back. We were sore but had enjoyed our first day's work. Soon after our return to camp the other three squads returned.

Whilst waiting for our evening meal we sat around talking about our work and various incidents. Some of the chaps were enjoying a shower and others were "brewing up" outside. We received our two ladlefuls of rice and soon afterwards the Camp Leader shouted us outside for roll call. The lights by the sentry boxes were on as we fell in outside. The roll call was soon over but not before we had found out that there were plenty of mosquitoes about. After we had finished our washing we sat around upstairs, talking and playing cards, reading, etc.

Looking outside I could see the sentries "pounding their beat." I now noticed a marked change in ourselves, for we could laugh and joke, whereas at Camp 53, for the most part, we just lay around thinking. The whole area was alive with malaria-mosquitoes and soon we were covered with lumps. Lights out came at 9 p.m. and shortly after we were all in bed.

The morning came and everyone got up feeling very stiff and tired. After breakfast we were soon again on our way to work, less two of the squad who were sick. And so the days passed and we began to learn our job. One day we would be planting, the next hoeing, and when the plants began to grow, we would start pruning. We began to learn a few words of Italian and also got to know better the people with whom we worked. As we came to know the foreman better, we knew when we had to work and when we could take it easy. During evenings in the camp we would sometimes do some washing or reading, and at other times we made cups, trays, suitcases, etc. from empty parcel tins. Sometimes we were able to get hold of a paper and so get a good idea how the war was progressing. Quite a few were ill with malaria.

Towards the end of July I was out in the fields when suddenly I collapsed with malaria. Two of the squad carried me back to camp and for a week I was in the infirmary.

Most nights one of the squads would come back with a paper and after our evening meal of rice the interpreter would read out the news to us. By now we were very much heartened at the way the war was progressing. We would hear many queer rumours and I remember when we heard Mussolini had committed suicide, but unfortunately this rumour, like many others, was untrue. September came and we could feel a different atmosphere in the air. In addition, the papers had been hinting that something big was going to happen.

Came the 4th of September and we knew that day the Allies had invaded Italy. As well as this, we heard rumours that our troops were advancing without opposition, that the Germans were leaving Italy, and that parachutists were being dropped all over the country; these rumours were so strong that at any moment we expected to see British parachutists around. We knew that our life as prisoners of war in Italy was coming to an end and the news of the invasion sent us mad with joy. From then on until the 8th, we waited to be freed and although we still went to work, we did hardly any. On the night of the 8th, at 6 p.m., we heard that Italy had signed unconditional surrender. When we got back to camp we also found that the other squads had heard the same news. However, as yet, the sentries and the Italians seemed to be carrying

on as though it were untrue. So we decided to dismiss the news as just another rumour.

We lined up for our rice and were soon sitting or standing around eating. Suddenly there was the sound of rifle fire and we were sent scurrying under the tables or lying on the floor. As I dived to the floor many thoughts passed through my mind.

Suddenly it was quiet again and one by one we began to move towards the door to try to find out what had happened. On opening the door and looking outside we saw all the Italian soldiers standing around in a group talking.

We heard a gramophone being played and the peasants singing and shouting. On getting a better view of them we noticed that they were going wild with joy and shouting "La Guerra finito."

Soon they came rushing to the outside of the camp and standing near the barbed wire waved and shouted joyfully at us. Then the sentries and the other Italian soldiers came into the compound to tell us the war was over and that we would soon, like them, be going home. But how mistaken we all were! All this happened in seconds and we just couldn't believe that we were no longer prisoners.

In our camp that evening we were all singing and making short work of our parcels. We went around saying "see you on the boat," all very happy and still wondering if it were true.

At 9 p.m. the Camp Leader called us on parade, saying that the Commandant wished to speak to us. We lined up outside in the glare of the searchlights and whilst waiting continued to kill the many mosquitoes that were about. The peasants were still standing by the wire and nearby we would hear others singing. The Commandant arrived, looking very serious, and then said that the war between Italy and Great Britain and her Allies was over. He told us that Italy had signed unconditional surrender and that we were now free men. He said that although we were free, we would still have to obey his orders until an Allied officer arrived. On hearing the news officially we just remained very quiet until one of the lads started to cheer and soon we were all cheering, with the Italians joining in. Most of the night we stayed up talking of many things, of how long it would take to get home, etc., etc.

The following morning we were asked if we wanted to go to

work until we were repatriated. Almost everyone said no and soon we were walking around outside the camp pleasing ourselves what we did, or where we went, and chatting with the farm workers.

Presently, we heard the first of the "bad news." One of the sentries came to us, looking very frightened, and was soon telling us that the Germans were coming into the country, not out. Near the camp was the main line to the Brenner Pass and a few of us went off to see what was happening. Nearing the railway we went into hiding and soon saw German troop trains on their way south, whilst the roads were busy with German convoys coming into the country. On our return to the camp we heard that the Germans were everywhere. They had patrols on the roads and were taking as prisoners anyone in uniform or of military age and sending them to Germany. Also, we heard that Verona, ten miles north, had been entered by the Germans and there had been fighting between them and the Italians.

We found that the Germans were already starting to visit the camps hoping to recapture all prisoners of war. The Commandant told us to go, as he was doing.

So the Italian soldiers and ourselves began hastily collecting some of our kit and all the civilians were crying. The Italian soldiers began to leave, hoping that by keeping to the fields they might eventually get home.

Eventually, the camp began to disperse. Some of the chaps were trying to get to Switzerland, 150 miles away, while others were making their way south.

They started to go off to their different objectives in groups of ones and twos. My pal and I decided it was unwise to do much walking around for the next few days. Our plan was to make for the fields and hide, hoping that eventually things would quieten down, so that we could make good our escape. After collecting some of our kit, and with a hasty handshake and good-bye to our friends, we started on our way. We now knew that we were fugitives and as we left the camp behind and kept to the fields, we moved very cautiously, hiding every time we saw anyone. We saw many Italian soldiers making their way south. So, after over eighteen months behind barbed wire we were now free, but what a freedom it was to be!

## CHAPTER 11

### ON THE RUN

FROM 9th September to 18th September, 1943, my pal and I hid in the grain and rice fields in the area of Isola della Scala and Verona. During the course of the day we lay in hiding and at night we asked the peasants for food and then changed our hiding place. On the first night out of the camp we were informed by some of the people living near it that the Germans had arrived at the next camp to ours, about three miles away, and that before any of the prisoners of war could get away the Germans had recaptured them and they had been taken to Germany. We also learned that an hour after we ourselves had got away a patrol had come for us, but had found the camp empty, save for a lot of our kit. During the days of hiding there we saw many prisoners of war and soldiers making their way south. More than once we saw German patrols go by. We wondered what had happened to the remainder of the boys from the camp, and while we lay low we tried to make up our minds what to do.

The nights were very cold and when morning came it found us quite wet with the damp, misty air. Each night we would stealthily make our way to the peasants' houses and besides getting food, would collect all the information we could about the Germans and our own troops. Once or twice we saw enemy reconnaissance planes flying low looking, no doubt, for escaped prisoners. We heard that three prisoners of war from our camp had been spotted the first day out, about two miles from the camp. They were making for Switzerland and one of them had been killed trying to get away. We learned that the people of Milan and Verona were fighting the Germans and our impression was that the enemy was trying to terrorize the populace. We lived in fear of being caught at any moment, and all day long we lay hidden, any noise causing us to jump. Instead of things quietening down, they started to get worse and we began to notice more patrols.

After a lot of talking we decided to get away from the area. Our plan was to keep walking south until eventually we joined our own troops. Had we then known of the obstacles in front of

us, we would never have gone that way. From where we were we could see the Alps, and although the border was only 150 kilometres away, we saw that the Alps were covered with snow, and realized that by the time we got to the border, it would be impossible to cross the mountains.

The reasons why we decided to make for the "front line" (about 600 kilometres away) were because we thought that even should we get into Switzerland we would be interned, which would be nearly as bad as being a prisoner of war, and we thought that whilst we were free (!) we would try and get through the lines to freedom, hoping that by the time we had walked many miles the Germans would be fast retreating. So, on the night of 17th September, we told our friends, the peasants, that we were leaving. They gave us what food they could and we exchanged our khaki trousers for two old pairs of civilian trousers. We also managed to get two old caps, and after saying good-bye, we left. We waited for the night to end and as dawn started to break on the 18th we commenced our journey.

Cautiously, we made our way south, taking our bearings from the sun, which was then up, stopping now and again to hide as we saw German patrols. We approached the main roads, making the best of the cover available. Near the edge of the roads we would sit and wait for the many lorries to pass before eventually running across the road and quickly getting under cover in the fields on the other side. We avoided all small towns, villages and roads, making a detour whenever we were near them. The sun was now high and we were soon perspiring freely.

We passed a few peasants who, although much afraid of the Germans, were still working in the fields. As we passed them they looked at us suspiciously, not knowing who we were, and we ourselves often wondered if they were Fascists or informers. So the miles slowly passed and at noon we were feeling very hungry. We decided to try to get some food, realizing that to a certain extent we would have to trust to luck whether we asked for food at the house of a Fascist, who would have taken us prisoner again, or whether we were lucky enough to meet someone who would help us.

We selected a suitable farm and approached it very warily.



There, near the farm, we hid and viewed the house. After waiting some time, during which everything looked normal to us, we decided to go and ask for food. We agreed to tell the people of the farm that we were Italian soldiers whose homes were in the south. Soon we were trying to tell the Signor to the best of our ability, for as yet our Italian was not very good, that we were making our way home to Naples. He asked us why it was that we didn't speak Italian like him and why we had a job to understand him. We finally satisfied him by saying that in Naples the dialect was totally different, which was the reason why we found it hard to follow him. He agreed to give us what food he could and invited us into his house. The interior was typical of most of the peasants' homes. There were hens and pigs inside and everything looked dirty. Whilst we were eating our meal of bread and cheese, together with some wine, he and his family stood around watching us, thinking, no doubt, that we were queer Italians, and the old man now and again spitting on the floor. As we ate we listened for the sound of German voices and kept ready for a quick move. However, we were able to finish our meal in peace, and after thanking the old man for it, we left as mysteriously as we had come.

We carried on until it was getting dusk, stopping now and again for a rest and a drink of water from the many streams we came across on our way. At dusk we decided to take another risk by going to the peasants' houses in the country to ask for a night's lodgings. After having tried about five houses in our effort to get some place to sleep in, we fell lucky on the sixth house. It was a small place and the Signor told us that we would have to sleep with the oxen in the stalls as he had no room in the house. We thought ourselves very fortunate, however, for we had begun to despair of finding some place to sleep. He went inside for an oil lamp and soon was showing us to our room!

We found ourselves in a small stall with three oxen, and whilst we were putting down some straw on the floor, he told us that he, too, had a son in the Army and he was very worried as to his son's whereabouts. He, no doubt, believed our story about being Italian soldiers and we wondered what he would have said had we told him we were escaped prisoners. He asked us if we were hungry and when we said "yes" he told us to go with him and he would get his

wife to cook us something. It was now very dark and we began to feel a lot safer. His wife was soon cooking us some sausages and eggs, and whilst we were sitting around he was telling her that we were Italian soldiers from Naples. She seemed to be dubious but took his word for it, and soon afterwards she was serving us with our meal. We were very hungry and quickly finished our supper. The old man then told us about the many Germans who were in the area, how they were taking prisoner all men of military age, and how they were terrorizing the people. From the talk we had with him we gained much information without making him suspicious of us. We then wished him and his wife "buon nott" and went to our beds.

Inside the stalls we looked around for the best way of escape should the need arise, and after having satisfied ourselves with our plan, we removed our boots, which we used for pillows, and, feeling very tired, were soon asleep. We were awakened before dawn the next day by the old man who had come to clean out the stalls. Reluctantly, and still feeling very tired, we put on our boots and prepared to go. We had a quick wash at the well and, after we had been given some bread and cheese to take with us, we said "Arriverderci," and started again on our way. It was very early when we left and the morning was cold. As yet there was hardly anyone about, but once in a while we heard the sound of German lorries on the roads. Walking through the fields which were covered with a heavy dew, we were soon very wet and waited for the sun, so that it would dry the ground, and so that we could make sure we were travelling in the right direction. So far we had covered roughly thirty kilometres since we had left our starting place and we didn't feel too cheerful when we thought about the five hundred more kilometres we would have to cover, and the passage of the enemy lines, before we could say we were free. Slowly and cautiously we continued south, avoiding the roads which were full of German transport and troops. Soon the sun was shining and we were able to correct our course. We continued to keep to the fields which were now getting drier and in which the peasants were now at work. We saw a few Italian soldiers making their way, like ourselves, southwards, and so we would hide until we felt sure that they were not Germans.

Some of the rivers that we had to cross were as yet not too deep, it being only late summer with so far little rain. We would paddle or wade across them because we knew that all the bridges were for the most part guarded. However, we did come to one river that was too deep to cross and its name was the river Adige. We made enquiries from the people working near the river as to where it would be best to cross. We learned from them that there was a small bridge about a mile east. They told us that we must be careful as it was usually guarded by Fascists. We decided to take a chance and, thanking them, started off. Keeping to the good cover that was near the banks we looked for the bridge. Soon we came upon it and, creeping close under cover, looked for the guards. Everything seemed fine and we could see no soldiers. Once in a while we saw a few people cross over. So, after an hour's wait, we decided to get across. Trying to walk calmly but with our hearts pounding, we found ourselves across. Just as we were getting into the fields again, to congratulate ourselves upon our luck, we suddenly spotted two Fascists speaking to a civilian whom we recognized as one of the people who had directed us to the bridge. Apparently he had then left his work and contacted the two Fascists, to whom he was now speaking, with the intention of having us recaptured. We now realized that he was an informer. When we had crossed the bridge they were standing a little farther along the main road. They suddenly spotted us and shouted and we saw them raise their rifles. We broke into a mad run with me shouting to my pal to "keep together." The whirr of the two bullets passed close and we ran on "zigzagging" all the time. The perspiration was running from us freely, with our haste and the thought of getting hit. Gradually, we began to increase the distance between us, and eventually we gave them the slip.

We stopped running, but continued to walk fast and at the same time decided to alter our course, to be on the safe side. Not stopping for food, although we were hungry, we tried to get as far as possible from the spot where we had been seen. When we eventually thought we were out of danger we selected a very quiet place and threw ourselves on the ground. We realized that in the future it would be better if we didn't tell anyone where we were going, also to speak to the least possible number of people. We

congratulated ourselves on our lucky escape and were now able to laugh over the Fascists missing us.

It was then late afternoon and we decided to sleep out that night. After a good rest we carried on and were able to get another loaf, grapes and some soup from a farmer living well in the country. He asked us who we were and many other questions, to which we answered anything but the truth in case he was an informer. He looked a decent chap but we were now suspicious of everyone. After thanking him for the food and just as it was getting dusk, we decided to walk a few more kilometres before looking for a nice spot to sleep. Stumbling over ploughed land and through fields of grain we eventually found a spot where we halted. After taking off our boots we lay down on the ground, with our bodies aching and our feet like hot fire. The night was cold, but we were exhausted from our day's travelling and were soon sleeping soundly. Early next morning we were awakened because of the cold and found ourselves wet from the morning dew. After flinging our arms around and stamping our feet we soon began to feel warmer. With the stars still shining we slowly walked south.

As soon as the sun began to get warm we stopped at a nearby stream and had a wash. Soon we were again on our way and had been walking for about two hours when we eventually passed some peasants working. Just as we had passed them we heard a girl shout to us and we decided to see what she wanted. She came running to us and asked who we were. We told her that we were Italians but she didn't believe us and kept asking if we were English. I realized that she had information that might help us and so, taking a chance, I told her that we were escaped prisoners of war. Then she told us that at 6 a.m. that morning the Germans had been to the town of Rovigo and had recaptured two escaped prisoners of war and had shot two others trying to escape. The houses where the prisoners had been sleeping had been set on fire and the owners had been sent to Germany. She told us that there were plenty of Germans and Fascists in the area and it would be better to go back. As yet we were two miles from the town of Rovigo. We were grateful for her information and to please her we promised to go back north. She watched us until we were out of sight, and we decided to go on south.

Whether or not she was a friend, we weren't sure, but if she had been an informer, she would have told the Fascists that we were now going north, where, presumably, the Fascists would direct their search. So, as I said, we decided to play safe again by going south.

We knew we were in what we called "a bad area," and our eyes and ears were in much use as we slowly went south. Finally, and without incident, we by-passed Rovigo and breathing a little easier, quickened our step. Using only very small paths through the fields, and passing through woods, grain, and ploughed fields, we finally found ourselves well past the "bad area." Again, we altered our course and travelled south-east.

It started to rain hard at 4 o'clock and we agreed to try and find a place to sleep that night as it was too wet to sleep out. It was approaching dusk so we started to select country houses well out of the way. We then asked for somewhere to sleep. After visiting a number of houses where we were informed that there was no room, or that the people were afraid, we eventually were lucky, and spent the night again with our friends, the oxen! We were given some food and our clothes were dried for us by the farmer's wife. Soon we were lying down on our beds of straw listening to the rain and thankful that we had a roof over our heads. We slept without fear that night, knowing that it was too wet for the Germans or Fascists to make a surprise raid.

The following morning we started on our way once again and were soon by-passing the town of Reggio. From information that we had gleaned we knew this was the German H.Q., and made sure that we gave it a wide berth. As yet the walking we had done had not been too hard, although we were always ready for sleep at the end of the day. We were on the Plains of Lombardy and until we reached Bologna, where the mountains started, we felt sure we could make good progress.

In addition, however, there was the large River Po which we would have to cross, how, we did not know as yet, but looked forward to the time when our task would be accomplished. Throughout the day we headed south towards the Po, sometimes hiding and watching odd Germans pass nearby. We saw many convoys on the roads and wondered how far our troops had

advanced since we had started our trek. As to the whereabouts of the fighting we had heard many rumours but nothing official. That evening found us about a kilometre from the River Po, and we decided to halt for the night.

We eventually found ourselves with an old peasant farmer and his wife, and for an hour that night, after we had eaten, we sat around the straw fire and gathered information from the farmer as to how we could cross the river, positions of the guards, etc. Also, we talked about our country and we began to learn a few more words of Italian. That night in the "stalls" my pal and I made our plans for the morrow and after making sure that nothing had been overlooked, we slept.

We arose well before dawn, chiefly because we intended to cross the river before it was light. The morning was cold and it was still dark as we moved on. Soon we saw the river and, creeping to the bank, were amazed at its width. We noticed that it was running fast and on the far side we saw a main road with trucks and motor cyclists passing by. The bank was well covered with small bushes and tall grass. Moving along the bank with our eyes and ears strained, on the alert for guards, we tried to discover a small boat. After searching for about two hours we decided it best to retire because we thought there might be daylight patrols. Very disappointedly we retraced our steps for about a mile, selecting a good hiding place amongst the grain fields and sitting down to renew our plans. Deciding that it would be best to keep in hiding for the day and to make another attempt that evening at another place along the river, we went in search of food and were able to get some bread and some raw sausages. Making sure that we were not seen going back to our hiding place, we were soon eating. Later on, with the sun shining, we fell asleep.

At last, darkness began to fall and we hastily moved along until once again we were at the river. After half an hour's further search, we were just deciding to give up because of its being too dark, when suddenly we saw an old man moving along the bank towards us. Quickly we went into hiding and watched him coming along. He was alone, so we decided that no harm could befall us if we spoke to him. Just as he was about to pass, we came out of hiding, giving him quite a start. Stopping him, we told him that

we were Italian soldiers trying to get to our homes in the south. We asked him if he knew of any place where we could get a boat to cross the river. We were very surprised when, after some hesitation, he told us that he himself possessed one and that if we would accompany him to the spot where it was he would take us over. Our luck was in, and feeling very pleased, we quickly followed him to the boat. After walking a few hundred yards we came to his home near the river and soon the three of us were carrying a small boat down to the bank. He told us before we pulled away that there were plenty of Germans in the area and patrols often went along the river banks. We would do well, he said, to get well away from the area before daybreak. There was now a mist and the night was cold. As the old man rowed us over we could hear lorries along the road on the south bank. After what seemed eternity, we suddenly saw the bank looming up out of the mist.

Then, after making sure that everything was quiet, we rowed to the bank. Hastily thanking the old fellow and saying good-bye to him, we cautiously climbed the bank. Peering along the road we saw that it was quiet, and softly we hurried over the road, down the bank and soon were once again in the fields. After walking for about an hour we stopped to rest, then carried on walking through the fields and small paths southwards until morning, when we found ourselves in the area of Ferrara, a large town. So we carried on our journey and eventually were in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains.

## CHAPTER 12

### IN THE MOUNTAINS

WE entered the mountains early in October and quickly began to feel the strain of having to walk on high ground. As much as possible we kept to the foothills and presently began to get glimpses of the Adriatic Sea about twenty kilometres east. To the right of us were the high mountain tops, some of them covered

with snow. The weather began to change and we experienced a number of rainy days. Owing to the rain the fields got muddy and, as a result, we began to cover less kilometres. Walking through ploughed fields and climbing the mountains made our boots thick with mud which, at times, was over our ankles. Slowly, we made our way south, sometimes climbing up the mountains with our feet wet and feeling like lead, sometimes slipping and falling down until we eventually gave up the attempt to keep our old clothes clean, with the result that we were often covered with mud. We paddled and swam many rivers and soon left the town of Modena behind us. At times we would run across bad areas where it was difficult to get food, and on several occasions we helped ourselves when the people were at work. At night time, in these bad areas, we would wait until the family had gone to bed, then we would creep into the "stalls" and sleep with the oxen, rising early the following morning before the owner was up, and going on our way. In good areas we would be fortunate to get something to eat and a place to sleep.

One day we had to cross a main road, and just as we were getting into the fields on the opposite side an S.S. man rode past on a bicycle. He looked at us and we prepared to run. However, after having given us a good look over, he rode on. We thought that he had recognized us and we decided to play safe by walking at night for the next two days. Our boots were beginning to wear and more than once we had to stop and root out nails that were troubling us. We passed the town of Pietro and a mile to the south we contacted an Italian doctor whose wife was English. After hiding in the fields all day we made our way to his home as soon as it was dark. Once inside the house we were given a big welcome. It was fine to feel that we were amongst friends, and after eating the best meal we had yet had since being in Italy, we settled down to talk of our plans.

His wife told us that there were plenty of Germans going south and that she didn't think it wise of us to try to get through the lines.

• We told them that we had no alternative because it was not wise to stay in one area where we should become known and, in our opinion, whilst we were walking, no one would know us. Seeing



that we intended to keep moving, the doctor produced maps which he gave us. These were the ideal things and we were very pleased for they came in very useful on our journey. We were also given some better clothing and that night we were given a real bed with sheets to sleep in.

At breakfast the next morning our hosts gave us an English cigarette and a cup of tea, and you can imagine how we felt after being without these luxuries for so long.

Eventually, it began to get light, and thanking them for their great kindness, we shook hands and they watched us depart across the fields.

Soon we were across the big coast road passing through Imola, Farenza, Forli and down the coast. The road was filled with traffic and it was some time before we were able to cross.

At one of the houses where we were stopping for the night we were given a leaflet. On one side it was printed in Italian and told the finder to pass the leaflet on to any prisoner of war that he or she saw. On the other side, it was printed in English and it stated that after 12th December any prisoner of war who was caught would be shot. The Germans who had sent these leaflets out and which had been dropped by plane, added that escaped prisoners of war were to hand themselves over to any German soldier, and that they would be well treated, etc. After reading the leaflet we talked about it as we lay in the stalls that night. Eventually, we decided to ignore it and, should we be picked up after the stated date, hope for the best. A few days later, whilst crossing a mountain ridge, we picked up another leaflet. This was printed in Italian and we were able to translate it. The Germans were now offering a reward of 5,000 lire for us, and we were worried. We became suspicious of everyone and to the few that we spoke to we told "wonderful" lies! The days and weeks began to drag by, and we were still free and still walking. Quite a number of times we had been chased by the enemy but so far had been lucky. We passed San Marino standing loftily in the mountains. Tired of mud and rain, and with our boots in bad shape, we were more than once tempted to take to the main roads but on second thoughts realized that it was too dangerous.

As we were walking along the mountains one day we saw people

about 200 yards ahead and, getting near them, we heard one speaking in English. We realized that they, too, were escaped prisoners of war and we were soon talking with them. It was the first time that we had met any prisoners of war and, like us, they were pleased to meet some of their own nationality. We exchanged much information with them, and were surprised when they told us that they were living with some peasants. They added that they knew that part of the country well, and invited us to their "home." We gladly accepted and after walking for about another mile and further into the mountains, we arrived at their abode. The house was on its own, well out of the way, and these three prisoners of war were earning their keep by working for the owner in the fields. They told the farmer that we were English prisoners of war and he made us very welcome. He was soon telling his wife to get us a meal ready, and was very surprised when we told him that we had walked from near Verona. We slept that night in the stalls, the farmer saying how sorry he was at not being able to fix us up with a bed. However, we were given some blankets and were made very comfortable and so we slept that night on a full stomach. Our clothes, which were now in need of repair, were mended for us the next day by the farmer's wife. We were also able to get a shave and managed to knock some of the nails out of our boots.

We were in need of a good rest and gladly accepted the farmer's invitation to stay for another day. That evening we sat by the straw fire with the wind blowing hard outside, and talked with the other prisoners of war about our plans, etc. After another good night's sleep we rose early the following day ready to move.

After a good breakfast we said good-bye and feeling refreshed started once more on our journey south. We walked sometimes by day, sometimes by night, with the weather getting worse and colder. We passed the towns of Urbino, Jesi (where the Germans had a large aerodrome) across the River Esino, till after what seemed years we eventually reached Macerata (Camp 53).

It was late November when we passed there, and so far we had walked about 500 miles. So we carried on until we passed the town of Camerino and, eventually, Ascoli. We knew now that the front line was at Ortona, and we decided to carry on in our

effort to get through the lines. The distance from Ascoli to Ortona was roughly 130 kilometres, and, after having covered 500 miles, we felt sure we could do the rest.

However, our optimism was to be shattered.

## CHAPTER 13

### PRISONER OF WAR AGAIN

WE had passed Ascoli and found that the going was harder. The peasants were afraid to help us and we had met plenty of prisoners of war retracing their steps. Some of these who spoke to us told us that it was impossible to get through. They told us that there were plenty of Fascists waiting for prisoners of war trying to pass through, and that it was very, very hard to get food. Some of these who spoke to us told us they had been as far down as the River Sangro and that for two days they had had nothing to eat. There were Germans and Fascists everywhere, they said, and advised us to turn back. We were very dismayed and for hours wondered whether it was worth all the risk. The last two chaps that we had met looked pretty grim.

After wandering round in circles for a day we eventually made up our minds. We decided to carry on and this we did. More than once we were soaked by the rain and we were lousy and covered with mud. Our boots were now in a bad way and our feet, as a result, were more often than not, soaked. We were often very hungry and quite a number of times we "borrowed" food from the houses. Some of the houses were now occupied by the enemy and this made things worse. Still, we kept plodding on, cheering each other when things looked grim. Presently we could see the famous Gran-Sasso mountain, which is 9,580 feet above sea level. The peak was in our path, and to get to the front we would have to cross it. We could see it, covered with snow, towering above the other mountain peaks. In due course we found ourselves at the foothills and, making our route more eastwards, we started to climb.

The air was cold and we were soon sliding through snow. We were hungry and more than once thought about turning back. Slowly we climbed higher and floundered in the snow. Eventually, we were at the top and feeling that the worst was over, we slowly, and with much slipping, began to descend. The wind was blowing hard, whipping the dry snow into our faces. The sun shining on the snow caused our eyes to ache and more than once we had to stop and close our eyes, so much did they ache. After what seemed years we again found ourselves in the lower hills. We were now heading towards Penne, a town near the Adriatic Sea. Faintly we could hear the sound of gunfire from the front. We took to a small path leading along the mountain slopes. We had been walking for quite some time when suddenly we saw two men walking towards us. They seemed to be quite harmless and we continued on our way. Just as we had passed them, we heard them shout "Mani alto!" and turning round with our hands in the air, we found ourselves gazing at two ugly revolvers. Covering us, they came towards us and asked if we were English. We replied "no," but soon found ourselves being marched towards the town of Penne. Arriving in the town we were taken to the town jail and there placed under lock and key. For some time we sat around feeling very dispirited, realizing that we were "in the bag."

Later we were escorted into a small room and found ourselves looking at a Fascist Captain, who was sitting behind a desk. He asked for our Identity Cards which, as we were without them, we could not produce. He started roaring and shouting questions at us: "Where are you from? Are you English?" However, after trying to bluff it out with him for some time we were later forced to tell him the truth. On hearing that we were English prisoners of war his face lit up and for a few brief moments we held visions of a firing squad. After listening to him shouting a bit longer we were taken to our cells once more. At 4 p.m. that evening we were brought some thin soup and a small piece of bread. We slept that night on the bare concrete floor and the following morning we were awakened with a kick from one of the Fascist guards. We were given a drink of coffee and a little later on found ourselves being shoved into a truck, along with about six more prisoners of war. Where they had come from we didn't know, but evidently

we had all been in different cells. The truck started to move away and we began trying to whisper to one another as to where we had come from etc., at the same time looking at the guard, who now and again would shout to us to be quiet. Much to our surprise, we were travelling south, and wondered where we were heading.

That afternoon found us at the end of the journey and we were handed over to some Germans. They marched us along for some distance and it didn't take much time for us to realize that we were not far from the front. We were still very perplexed as to where we were going. Eventually we were halted and could see a lot of Germans, and also other prisoners of war "digging in." We were soon put to work and with a guard standing by us and a German who spoke English telling us what to do, we became busy digging trenches. We were there a week and were too well guarded to try to escape. We found out that we were in the area of Castel di Sangio, and that we were "attached" to the Hermann Goering Division.

Whilst we were there we were hard worked but quite reasonably treated. We were given cigarettes and the food we received, though not plentiful, was quite good.

## CHAPTER 14

# THE ROYAL AIR FORCE

A WEEK later we were taken away in lorries under German guards. After a few miles of travelling we pulled into a small railway station. Some time later a train carrying other prisoners of war pulled in and into the empty rear cattle trucks we were pushed. Shortly afterwards we were again travelling north and we now surmised that we were on our way to Germany. We passed the towns of Rieti, Spolato and Foligno.

We were now resigned to another period behind barbed wire. We had just passed through the town of Perugia, which is well in the mountains; the time was about 5 p.m., and the train was gradually pulling its heavy load through the hills. Suddenly, I heard the sound of low-flying aircraft. A few moments later I

heard them diving and then the rattle of machine guns. Seconds later and now knowing that the train was the target, we all heard the dive of one of the planes which was then followed by a loud explosion. The whole of the train gave a sudden lurch, then stopped. Again we heard the dive of a plane followed by another explosion. We heard the sound of the shrapnel as it hit the trucks.

By now everyone was panicky and the guards hastily flung open the door. Suddenly, and to the sound of machine-gunning, we surged towards the door. Machine-gun bullets were flying all around, ripping great holes in the trucks. Some of the prisoners of war in our truck had been hit and others were instantly killed. After much fighting I found myself outside and was quickly joined by my pal. The scene that met our eyes was chaotic. We, like the others, including the guards, started to run away from the train and the planes kept machine-gunning. A few yards from the train we were forced to dive to the ground as a Spitfire came down with guns blazing. The train was completely wrecked and the front portion of the trucks was on fire. Quite a number of prisoners of war and guards must have been killed. How many, I don't know to this day.

I could see prisoners of war trying to escape and when spotted the guards would attempt to shoot them. Some made it, some didn't. Everywhere there was panic; looking around us I could only see one guard nearby and he was about 20 feet away. Suddenly I decided to escape. Shouting to my pal my intentions, he answered, "Let's go!" When the next Spitfire dived we jumped to our feet and soon were running for all we were worth. We were quickly spotted and immediately we heard the "whirr" of the bullets passing very near.

We commenced to zigzag and stumble our way over the fields. After running for some time and after reaching a high spot in the mountains, we decided to have a quick rest. It was now getting dusk and we were thankful that soon the night would cover our movements. Looking back we could see the fires and wreckage of what once had been a train. We thanked our fate that we had been lucky enough to be at the rear part of it. So once again we were "free."

We knew that the train had been bombed near Perugia so we

decided to walk the night, east-south-east. Darkness came soon and with the help of the stars we climbed and felt our way from that area. The night ended and it found us well away from Perugia. We were more than hungry and as the dawn came to find us still high in the mountains, we agreed to try to get some food.

Standing by itself we saw a peasant's small house and decided to ask there for food. We were lucky and were quickly eating a good meal of polenta. The owner of the house asked if we were Patriots and, very surprised, we said, "No, but do you know where there are any?" He said that the mountains about there were full of rebel bands. We felt sure that he knew more, but could obtain no further information from him.

We decided to carry on our journey and as we set out it was raining hard. The fields were very wet and at times we were wading through deep mud. The few people we saw looked at us very suspiciously and we were very wary. We carried on all that day without incident, and at night slept in a stall with the cattle. At about 2 p.m. the following day, feeling very tired, we found ourselves in the area of Tolentino.

We were walking along a small mountain path when we heard the distant sound of small-arms fire. This carried on for some time, and so, for safety, we hid in the fields. Presently we saw about six persons walking along the path. They were dressed in a mixture of civilian and Army clothes. We noticed that they were armed. As they passed I heard them laughing and talking in English. Turning to my pal, I noticed him looking with a perplexed expression. They continued talking in English and it began to enter our heads that they might be armed British prisoners of war. We decided to take a chance. As we came out of our hiding place they were about five feet ahead. We shouted to them in English. Instantly they turned around with their guns pointing at us. Without moving they shouted, "Are you prisoners of war?" We answered "Yes."

They told us to come forward with our hands in the air. We did as they ordered and as we went forward we hoped that they really were English. They themselves were wondering if we were English and not, as they suspected, Germans posing as English prisoners of war.

## REBELS

MUCH to the relief of all concerned, we finally convinced each other that we were English. The English rebels asked us where we were heading for and what were our plans. We told them how we had tried to get through the lines, how we had been caught and how we had again escaped when the train was bombed. We explained that we weren't sure what the best plan was for us. One of them suggested going along with them, to stay, or to leave, whenever we wished. So, deciding that we had nothing to lose, we agreed.

We trudged along the muddy mountain track towards the area of San Genesio. On reaching our new abode, which was an old house, my pal and I were each given a Sten gun and ammunition and began to settle down to a period as rebels. Throughout the winter we lived in the mountains, ambushing odd enemy trucks that came along the mountain roads; at other times we raided the Fascist grain stores, giving the grain back to the peasants. Sometimes we were engaged in local fights with the enemy. The snow came and at times it was ten feet deep. The days slowly passed, and we eagerly clung to any news that we received about the advance of the Allies. A few times my pal and I explored the coastline near Civitanova and Recanati in an effort to find a small boat, but to no avail. So we continued to live in the mountains and began to notice a change in the behaviour of the people towards us. They now wanted nothing to do with us, having given up hope that our troops would liberate them.

After spending the winter up in the mountains we were forced to scatter as things were getting too hot. So my pal and I once again took to the plains. Here we heard various stories of how prisoners of war had been murdered by the Fascists. We found it impossible to get lodgings for the night as the peasants told us that they were too frightened of the consequences. The Fascists and Germans had begun to terrorize the people. On more than one occasion we saw houses being burned because prisoners of war had been found in the houses, or even on the land. We found it very hard to get



food, and at times were forced to threaten the people unless they gave us food.

We still possessed our Sten guns and at times we would boldly walk up to a house saying that we were Germans and demand food and a night's sleep, and at the sight of our guns the people didn't argue. Many a day we lived on dandelions, which we boiled.

## CHAPTER 16

### NEAR THING

AFTER many days of wandering around and often being chased by the enemy, my pal and I decided to visit some friends of ours in the area of Macerata. After two nights of walking, and sleeping in the fields by day, we arrived at our destination. Our friends, who were peasants, were very surprised to see us, thinking that we had been recaptured. We told them of our many adventures. They invited us to stay with them for a while, and on seeing our surprised looks, told us that the Fascists had left that area and that it was quiet.

We agreed to stay and as there was little room at the house for two, my pal was fixed up at a neighbour's house, about twenty yards distant. I had been there a week, during which time I had never gone out of the house during the day. I would get some exercise and would visit my pal at night. The reason for this was that one could trust hardly anyone. We knew that even children were acting as informers. On one of these occasions we arranged a place of meeting should the need to make a sudden move arise. The family were able to give us a lot of information regarding the front, and although a lot of it was only rumour, we were able to get some idea where the fighting was.

At about 9 p.m. on this particular night I decided to turn in, so, bidding "bonne notti" to the family I went to my room. It had been snowing the previous day but had since thawed and looking from the window I saw that there was a full moon, making the place look like day, and the ground was a sea of mud. I got into bed, thankful that I had a roof over my head.

I had been sleeping restlessly for some time and awoke with a feeling that something was going to happen. I lay there trying to shake off this feeling. I noticed that the moon was still up, and guessed the time to be about 11 p.m. Everything was very quiet and in the distance I could hear a dog barking and I listened to the sound of the nearby river. Suddenly I heard the sound of feet upon the gravel pathway leading to the house. Then the dog started to bark furiously. Instantly I was out of bed and began quickly to put on my trousers. That the "visitors" were Fascists I felt certain.

By now the old man was in my room and was telling me to "via." At the same time I heard the Fascists banging at the door and shouting "Apri noi siamo Fascisti." All this happened in split seconds. My only means of escape was through the small bedroom window, but before I could do anything I heard the old man opening the door. Instantly I dived to the only means of cover, which was under the bed. There I crouched by the top corner, near the wall, with perspiration running from me and all sorts of thoughts going through my mind. I wondered if they would shoot me if I were found, for I had heard of prisoners of war being shot offhand, and knew this to be true. The Fascists were now in the next room and I heard them telling the old man that he was hiding a prisoner of war and that if he would hand me over to them they would say no more about the matter.

However, my opinion was that if I were handed over, the old man would probably be shot for harbouring a prisoner of war, also, his home would be burned and his family left to fend for themselves. This was no idle dream of mine; I knew this had happened more than once and I have personally seen houses burning. The Fascists went on to say that if I wasn't handed over, they would search for me, and if I was found then they would shoot the old man. To my relief he said, "There is no prisoner of war here, so you had better search."

This they started to do and I saw two of them as they entered my room; to be more precise, I saw the legs of two of them. I heard them cursing everything and everyone, and the perspiration just oozed from me as I watched them move around the small room. In addition to the bed in the room there was also a small

chest of drawers. One of the Fascists began to look into the drawers, evidently more interested in loot than getting me. The other approached the bed and for one awful moment I thought it was the end. Had I wished to, I could have touched him by reaching out my arm. I saw him look under the bed, but instead of looking at the head of the bed, he casually looked at the foot and then walked away. I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming, but to my amazement found that I had been missed. They went into the other room where I could hear the Signora crying and the Fascists shouting to her to keep quiet.

I decided to make a dash for it and began to edge myself to the small window, listening at the same time to the enemy searching the next room. I was at the window now and cautiously I began to open it, at the same time looking to see if I could see a sentry outside. I could see no one and, opening the window and saying a silent prayer, I dropped to the ground. It was about a ten-foot drop, and as I hit the stony ground with my bare feet, I could hear my heart banging like a drum. I started to run through the mud, feeling certain that I was breaking all records. I was listening for the bang and expecting to feel the bullet entering my back. Nothing happened and on I ran. My throat was like leather. I lost my head and suddenly stopped, realizing that I had been heading for the main road. Quickly I darted into the shadows of a large tree. There, trying my best to become part of the tree itself, and cursing the moon, I began to get my breathing back to normal. Standing there, with my eyes and ears alert, I found it hard to believe that I was still free.

After a while I began to feel the cold and my feet, besides being covered with mud, were full of thorns. There I stopped for about two hours, and now and again I would move with the shadows as they altered with the moon. I was now frozen so, after what seemed years, and watching the moon starting to wane, I decided to go back for the rest of my clothes. I painfully made my way to the cover of a small bush near the house, and was now wondering what had become of my pal. After making certain that everything seemed normal again at the house, I slowly walked around to the door. The dog heard my coming and started to bark loudly, but on whispering his name and patting him, he quietened.

The old man had heard me whisper to the dog, and as I knocked, he opened the door. On seeing me he burst into tears, threw his arms around me and began patting me on the back. Inside, he called his wife and, crying, she told me that they had thought I was caught. I asked for my clothing and being too cold to put it on, they wiped some of the mud from my feet and helped me to dress. I asked about my pal, but all that they knew was that the Fascists had been to their neighbour's house, but whether he had been able to escape they couldn't say. I told them that I was leaving right away but when things were quieter I would return and asked them to try and find out who had been the spy. The Signora gave me a loaf and, saying good-bye, I left them both crying.

Making for the rendezvous which my friend and I had arranged in case of trouble, I began to look around. Suddenly, I saw someone in the shadows nearby watching me. I prepared to run in the opposite direction. So, shouting out my pal's name I started to run the opposite way, when I heard him shouting my name. Feeling very excited, I turned back and there, running towards me, I saw my friend.

We couldn't believe our eyes, and were shaking hands and acting like schoolboys. He asked me how I had got away, and after telling him, I asked about his own escape. He told me briefly how, on hearing the Fascists, he had been helped by the Signor up a ladder and on to the roof. There he had stayed behind the chimney, like me, cursing the moon and trying to look like part of the chimney. He told me how he had seen the Fascists leaving and had then dressed and moved to our meeting place.

We talked about what would be the best move and eventually decided to get back to the mountains. So off we started in the early hours of the morning and watched the moon disappear behind the mountains.

## NEARLY CAUGHT

ONCE again we were in the mountains and joined with another band of rebels, in the area of Perugia. This band was composed of Yugoslavs, Russians, Italians, and about six of us who were English. We were well armed and were one "big happy family." We took great pleasure in shooting up any of the enemy that happened to come near our mountain home. Sometimes, during our many small guerilla fights, we lost a few men, but every time the enemy tried to dislodge us from the mountains they always ended up by giving up, so good was our commanding position.

One day in a church near the foothills of the mountains there were about twenty-seven young Italian youths hiding. They had run away from home because the Germans were wanting them for work in Germany. They had made for the mountains and were given shelter in the church. Doubtless their intentions were to join up with the rebels. The Fascists were "informed" about these youths and that particular night they had gone to the church. There, while these young chaps were sleeping, the Fascists had entered and in cold blood had shot the lot of them, saying that the young Italians were rebels. This I know to be true for I was acquainted with one of the boys who was shot and I later saw his body with the others in the church. The rebel bands for miles around heard about the murder and for the following few days there was much shooting of Fascists.

So the time passed and daily the people became more afraid of the enemy. Sometimes, my friend and I would be in the mountains, sometimes we would be looking along the Adriatic Coast for a boat in which we hoped to escape. Other times, we would walk miles so that we could hear the wireless. Then we heard from other prisoners of war about a plan to escape by submarine. Allied parachutists were supposed to have been dropped behind the line. The word went round that an Allied submarine would be coming into a place near the coast to get prisoners of war away. The submarine was supposed to come to a spot five kilometres north of the port of Loreto. So, by following out the instructions given to

us by other prisoners of war, my pal and I made our way on the proposed night to the coast. Arriving there without incident we contacted about thirty more prisoners of war. We waited near the beach for the submarine, which was supposed to arrive at 1 a.m. It was a cold night, and sitting around making good use of cover, we waited. I began to get a little suspicious and talking to my pal we decided to move away from where most of the others were. I was suspicious because no one seemed to be in charge and all that we could gather was that the submarine was due about 1 a.m. We moved to a spot about 100 feet from the beach and settled down, again hoping that the "escape" was the real thing.

We had been sitting there for about half an hour and it was getting on towards midnight. Suddenly there was a lot of shouting on the beach and we saw the other prisoners of war starting to run. Without waiting any longer and knowing it now to have been a trick to catch us, my pal and I started running for all we were worth across the fields. We were able to get away without any trouble and as we ran we could hear the shooting going on. Later on we were able to gather that the "submarine escape" had been a trick of Jerry's. We were also able to find out that about six chaps had been killed and about twenty others caught. So, once again, we had been lucky and made up our minds not to go on any more mass escapes.

We decided to make another attempt to get through the lines, which were now at Pescara. We started off and, moving cautiously, headed south. Each mile south that we took found the people more afraid. Some nights we slept out in the fields and other times we would walk all night and rest by day. Food was scarce and more than once "borrowed" chickens which we later exchanged for bread.

For the next three days we had very little to eat. We saw plenty of Fascists and Germans and distantly we heard the artillery at the front. Allied bombers and fighters were continuously flying overhead and once or twice we saw Spitfires machine-gunning the enemy transport. However, owing to lack of food and the impossibility of getting information, we decided it best to retrace our steps, and, disappointedly, we again started to go north, walking by night, until we were in the area of San Genesio.

The days passed, and the warm weather again came. The corn was growing fast and we were able to hide better. By now the Allies had "cracked" Cassino and the line was moving. The enemy organized big country searches, which we called Restelamentos. There were many such searches in which the enemy tried hard to recapture prisoners of war. During these Restelamentos the enemy would burn down whole fields of grain. Another favourite trick of theirs was to throw grenades into any likely hiding places. During the search anyone who was seen running would be shot at. Many houses were burned and we were continually changing our areas, moving by night. May passed, with us not knowing where or what to do for the best. We lived by eating anything that came our way, including sparrows.

## CHAPTER 18

### RETREAT

WE were now constantly on the run as the Germans and Fascists were making every effort to recapture us. Sometimes we were in the mountains and sometimes we were living in caves, deep in the many gullies.

One prisoner of war who I knew was living in a dugout which was beneath a manure pit. Other prisoners of war were living in hollowed haystacks. We knew that the front was moving and soon we began to hear the sound of explosions as the enemy blew up bridges, factories, etc.

Two days later we heard from another prisoner of war whom we met that Rome had fallen. Then we began to notice a lot of troop movement along the roads. Overhead we saw our fighters diving and machine-gunning the enemy. Some of the enemy were going north by trucks, others we saw going on bicycles, and others were going with carts and oxen. Throughout the days following, the sky was filled with the sound of our planes. We saw the Germans going to a lot of the country houses, where they would take away the horses and oxen. Also, we saw them burning whole fields of

grain and causing wanton destruction. We were forced to be very alert for the enemy were still making searches for us.

A few days later we were suddenly startled to hear the sound of shells passing overhead and we knew then that our freedom was near. We were now about four miles north of the River Chienti, north-east of Macerata. There was plenty of artillery fire and we saw the shells exploding in the surrounding countryside. We saw the Germans starting to dig in just south of where we were, close to the north bank of the River Chienti. Suddenly, it dawned upon us that they were making a line there, and if that were so, we were still behind the line and in a dangerous position. We lay low all day watching them digging and often being shelled and machine-gunned from our fighters and artillery. Throughout the day we watched and with the aid of the map we had we made a note of their positions and as it was getting dark we decided to try to get through.

Fortunately I was in possession of a small luminous compass which had been dropped to us whilst with the rebels. We prayed for the sun to set and more than once we had to lie very low as German patrols passed nearby. At last the day ended and except for an occasional shell bursting, it was quiet.

We decided to start off about midnight, and we patiently waited as the time dragged by. Now and again we could hear the Germans talking, and on two occasions we saw the glow of a cigarette. Eventually we decided to start.

## CHAPTER 19

### THROUGH THE LINE

TAKING out the compass, we set our course at due south. It seemed years before we plucked up enough courage to take our first step. With our eyes trying to pierce the darkness and our ears strained for any sound, we slowly moved forward. Sometimes I was leading, with my chum right behind me; sometimes it was vice versa. Stopping once in a while we would listen and also check our course.



Getting farther along we decided to crawl and soon were slowly pulling ourselves along the hard ground. The going was very slow and perspiration was pouring from us. Now and again we would have to stop on hearing the voices of the sentries. Sometimes there were Very lights fired, making everything look like day. Once or twice we saw the dim outline of a sentry and would stop, watching him like hawks, until he disappeared into the shadows.

Presently we saw the silver gleam of the river and, with our faces blackened, we crawled onwards. After what seemed eternity we arrived at the bank of the river and quickly crawled under some bushes. Here we stayed and listened and then, after making sure of our position, we started to crawl, till we found ourselves in the icy, cold water. Quietly we started to float ourselves across and slowly we saw the opposite bank looming into view. Getting out of the water we crawled to the cover of some bushes and listened. Everything was quiet, one could almost feel the quietness. Taking out the compass again, we crawled on our way. After having crawled about a quarter of a mile, which seemed to take years to do, we started to walk. So, keeping close together and feeling tense, we hurried on.

We began to make better going and were now feeling confident that the worst was over. Soon the night began to end and daybreak found us lying under the cover of some bushes, wet, tired, but happy. The fighters and bombers began to appear and once again the shells were flying around. Shortly afterwards we saw a patrol of six men coming slowly in our direction. Getting under cover we watched them approach. We noticed that they were dressed in British uniforms, and on hearing them talking, we knew that they were Poles.

## CHAPTER 20

### PRISONERS

As they were about to pass us we came out of hiding and were at once covered by small arms. We went forward with our hands up and started to explain that we were English. However, as none of

them spoke English we had to give it up as a bad job. Four of the Polish troops carried onwards and the other two, keeping us covered, took us south. Soon we came to a small lane and were ordered on to a truck. Eventually, we came to the Polish H.Q. which was in the village of Lorro Picana. There we saw trucks, tanks, armoured cars and all the rest. We were then escorted into one of the houses and found ourselves before the Polish Commander.

The Commander started to talk in broken English, saying, "Are you English?" We replied, "Yes," and told him our story. He said that if our story was true we had nothing to fear, but until such time as we were interrogated we would remain under guard. From there we were escorted into a small room where we were put under guard. We watched the sentries change and by now, feeling hungry, we asked the sentry for something to eat. Eventually, and after much protest, the sentry shouted to a passing soldier. A little later we received our food, consisting of tea, meat, bread and butter, etc. After having been so long without such food, we found it hard to start. However, after being held two days as suspects we were interrogated by an English Captain.

It was good to see the familiar uniform and to hear someone speaking English. For two hours we were questioned about our Regiment, etc., until finally we convinced the Captain that we were English. He shook us by the hand and congratulated us on our escape. He then gave orders for our release and told us that the Poles would look after us. As soon as it became known that we were English, we were waited on hand and foot. The Polish troops could not do enough for us, and they were continually giving us cigarettes, etc. You will imagine how we both felt, knowing that at last we were with friends again, and we began to look forward to going home.

## THE ROAD HOME

AFTER two days with our Polish friends we started off on our journey. Travelling by lorry down the coast road, we passed columns of men and guns, etc. on their way to the front. It was grand to see our Army once again and to know that we were amongst friends.

We passed through towns and villages that had been destroyed by the fighting. We saw bridges and factories that had been destroyed by the retreating enemy. Civilians were wandering amongst the rubble that had once been their home and town. At night we stayed at various R.A.S.C. camps. Eventually we arrived at Foggia where we were taken to a camp and there met other escaped prisoners of war.

Foggia had been heavily bombed and there was destruction everywhere. From there we travelled by train and at noon the next day we were in Naples. We stayed for a week in a camp just outside the town. Here we were "deloused," examined, given new clothes, and again interrogated. Our "civvies" were burned and we began to feel a bit more like human beings.

We were given the best of treatment and the camp staff did everything to make us comfortable. After having been issued with our clothing, etc., we were taken to a big rest camp at Salerno. Here we lived liked lords, and were "fattened up" for the journey home. We spent the days there swimming and sunbathing, etc. Then came the great news that we were sailing for home the next day. We were all excited and very few of us slept that night. So we boarded the ship, and after a grand voyage, we arrived at Liverpool eleven days later, on 10th August, 1944. As the ship steamed slowly down the River Mersey, we were all on deck looking, at long last, at good old "Blighty."

After disembarking, and feeling like schoolboys, we went to a transit camp. Here we were given our pay, leave coupons, etc., etc., and so started off on twenty-eight days of heaven.

After I had finished my leave I reported back to my unit, and am now soldiering somewhere in England.





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